

# on spec

the canadian magazine of the fantastic



## new fiction

Cliff

**Burns**

Karen

**Traviss**

Patrick

**Johanneson**

Joanne

**Merriam**

Michael

**Brockington**

Karl

**Johanson**

Jack

**Skillingstead**

Megan

**Crewe**

Todd

**Bryanton**

Catherine

**MacLeod**

## nonfiction

Susan

**MacGregor**

Steve **Mohn**

& Peter **Watts**

cover art by **Martin Springett**

# on spec

spring 2004

vol 16 no 1 #56

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*I know more about rejection than most writers will ever know in their lifetimes. If we've ever rejected your work, I share your pain...*

What I did on my 3-year leave:

# My life as a stand-up comic

Susan MacGregor, Fiction Editor

AS SOME OF YOU MAY OR MAY NOT KNOW, I TOOK A FEW YEARS leave from *On Spec* in order to give vent to a very extreme and insane mid-life crisis. At 45, I said goodbye to *On Spec* and became a Stand-Up Comic.

I have always been of the mind that if you want to try something, you should do it. Of course, this is flawed thinking. With this type of logic, you can murder your boss because you think you might like to. In my case, this inclination led to me explaining why I *didn't* win a Ladies Night Orgasm-Faking Contest to a room full of 300 strangers.

Let me tell you. I know more about rejection than most writers will ever know in their lifetimes. If, as *On Spec* editors, we've *ever* rejected your work, I share your pain. Luckily for me, rejection was kept to a minimum, and both my writing and comedy have brought me the highest of highs, too. Unlike having to wait months before I know if a story I've written has sold, I'll know if my joke flies immediately. Comedy is wonderful when you can bask in the instant gratification of applause.

So, why am I back? Well, there are several reasons. For one, I've missed my fellow editors. For two, I've also missed the ol' slush pile. (Yes, I know my thinking is still a bit wonky, but where can logic survive in a fluffy pink cloud of sentimentality?) Mostly, it's good to be home. And although I



can't say that being a comedienne has contributed to my writing or editing skills, I *can* say that there are a number of things that writing fiction and performing comedy have in common. And so I pass these along, in the event that you might benefit from my experience.

### Things to Do as a Comic and/or a Writer:

1. *Do Your Time.* This is the First Commandment of Comedy. If you're only given five minutes stage time, then *that's what you do*. No more than that, even if you're killing (editor's note: *Killing* is a comedy term meaning to bring the audience to the point of peeing their pants because they're laughing so hard). At *On Spec*, our word limit is 6,000 words. Since I've been back, I've come across too many stories that go beyond the limit, and I'm not laughing. Don't give us the first chapter of your novel. And don't try to disguise your novel as a short story, because we can tell the difference. For a short story, 3,500 to 4,000 words is preferable. In this, I'm like the club manager of a comedy house—the more comics I can pack into the late show, the better. Same thing with the magazine. The more stories we can publish per issue, the more we like it.
2. *Delivery is Everything.* If a comic doesn't make her audience laugh within the first 15 seconds she's on stage, she's failed. Same thing with writers (and even more so, with editors). That first sentence should grab me, intrigue me, or challenge me. Because comics know that the more laughs they get per minute, the more successful they are, they learn very quickly how to make every word count. They cut with a surgeon's precision to get down to the *funny*. In fiction, writers need to do the same, funny or otherwise. Don't mince words. Trim wherever possible. Self-lobotomize, if necessary.
3. *Take Risks with Character.* Die gloriously, live gloriously. Open a vein and bleed all over the stage or page. Make it personal, when you're playing or writing a character. Coming back to *On Spec*, I was once again burdened with stories that contained too many character stereotypes. A comedy audience will forgive a stereotype, but a fiction editor won't. Believe you me, I'm more jaded about this than ever.
4. *Know Your Audience.* Why I ever considered the mating habits of a salmon to be funny, I'll never know. My audience didn't get it, either. But they really liked it when I told them about the mating habits of a cougar, a.k.a., yours truly. (For those of you who *don't* know what a cougar is, your innocence is so refreshing! A cougar is not a dangerous mountain cat that lives in the Rocky Mountains. It's a middle-aged, mini-skirted female with questionable taste in hair

streaks who prowls the bars for tight-bunned 20-somethings. And to answer your *next* question—in real life, I’m a happily married mother of three.) Bottom line? Know what your audience likes, and give it to them. At *On Spec*, we once received a story about an alien who had the body of a gorgeous woman, but the head of a dog. Considering that five of us were women editors at the time, I’m sure you can imagine how well that story went over.

5. *Break the Rules.* A well known professional male comic once told me that women comics can’t do drunk jokes. I was so incensed with his attitude that I went home and wrote the funniest material I’ve ever performed—all about the differences between how men and women get drunk. (And yes, as we are told in CanLit, it’s good to write about what you know. Luckily, my research didn’t need to be exhaustive.) As annoyed as I was when I first created that material, I now thank the pro for pushing me to new limits. With it, I killed consistently, so much so that I had a hard time finding better material to top it. For fiction writers, a parallel can be found in originality. Always go beyond your first idea. Always put your own personal twist on things. As editors, we’ve seen Little Red Riding Hood told from the wolf’s point of view a thousand times. We’ve seen thin camouflages of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. If you want to catch our attention, don’t go anywhere near what’s already been done. Blow up new ground.
6. *Be Nice to the Staff.* As a comic, it paid to be nice to the club staff—the waiters, the bartenders, and especially, the club manager. If you were nice, occasionally you’d be granted allowances—like extra stage time. As a writer, this translates into being nice to the editors. Proofread your work. Know the format and send in a clean copy. Spelling and punctuation count. Patience does, too. We don’t always read the manuscripts as quickly as we hope. Let us know if you’ve sent us a multiple submission. And especially let us know if you’ve sold your story elsewhere, and it’s our loss. Even editors need to hear atta-boys or atta-girls now and then. It’s nice to get thank-you letters. Also, we’re not bribable, but we would love it if you thought so.

So why did I leave comedy? Lifestyle and temperament, mostly. I decided I was more suited to writing editorials like this one in a smoke-free kitchen than waiting in an adrenaline-soaked haze to hit the stage and do my time. Call it a case of public vs. private performance. As much as I loved the instant high of a warm 300-strong audience, I think I like the quiet of my thoughts better. Plus, commitment-phobe that I can be, I haven’t exactly *left* comedy. I’m just on leave. •



*P.S. I totally and utterly defend your constitutional right to free speech and all that, dig? But ... answer me this: Are there any limits?*

# Printed Matter

Cliff Burns

General Delivery  
Sawich Island, B.C.  
V8K 1A4 CANADA

June 15, 1996

Stanley Schaefer, Proprieter  
c/o Gryphon Books  
P.O. Box 774  
Arkham, CA 96088

Dear Mr. Schaefer:

Just received your catalogue this afternoon, delivered by Long John Dunham, the feistiest (sp?) 74-year-old grizzled islander type you're ever likely to meet. Every week or so John makes the run across to Sawich to collect his and Aggie's mail and he's usually pretty good about asking for mine while he's at it. Normally there's not much, but sometimes there's a magazine or "Publisher's Sweepstakes" or what have you. (It don't matter to me—I read *everything*!)

I must say that, at least at first glance, I am deeply impressed with



Gryphon Books. This has got to be the most eclectic selection of books I have ever come across!

I am greatly anticipating paging through your catalogue at my leisure and I think you can expect an order from me very soon.

Looking forward to doing business with you!

Sincerely,

Russell Q. Hewitt,

Bibliophile Xtraordinaire

P.S. Where the heck *is* Arkham? I have a Rand-McNally road atlas and it doesn't show up anywhere in California. Did you go to Miskatonic U? (Ha Ha) I guess you probably get a lot of cracks like that. Hope you don't take offence. In appreciation, RQH

**June 23, 1996**

Dear Mr. Schaefer:

I finally had a chance to sit down and make it all the way through your excellent and most stimulating catalogue. My brain is still reeling from the sheer wealth and diversity of titles you are bold enough to offer. My compliments to you, sir!

Where else could a guy get a copy of *Deviant*, that unparalleled examination of the sick mind of Ed Gein, complete with never-before-seen photos ... and (could this be true?) *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the seminal (ha) text on weirdness and depravity...and (talk about indispensable!) *Written In Blood*, a book with lotsa purty pictures by and of people drawing with their own excreted bodily fluids (encore! encore!). And toss in *Skinned Alive (True Tales Of Taxidermy)*...Mirbeau's exquisite *The Torture Garden* (an old militia buddy of mine absconded my copy) and, for fiction, I'll take that Jeter-penned sequel to *Blade Runner*, that looks suitably trashy.

I assume you prefer payment in U.S. currency so I'll get John to buy a money order at the post office. The money will arrive along with one great, big shit load of thanks for making this homeboy's *decade*.

Finally I have met someone who understands my warped mind!

Keep up the good work!

Sincerely,

Russell Q. Hewitt

P.S. Do you happen to have a copy of *The Turner Diaries* in stock?

**July 29, 1996**

Dear Stanley:

Thanks for the incredibly funky card and I hope you don't mind if I call you "Stanley" which, I think, is a very dignified name—are you British, by any chance?

You addressed me as "Russell" and that's okay but most of the time I guess I'm just plain, old Russ. That's me, your basic shy, withdrawn type with an affinity for good guns and bad women and an otherwise above average I.Q. who's got a lot (too much) time on his hands to bury his nose in any book that strikes his fancy whenever he damn well pleases (and a firm intention of keeping it that way!).

I do go on, don't I?

Sawich Island is just where the mail goes. I live on this skinny, little fingernail of rock further down the way, far enough from Sawich to maintain my solitary existence. Around here, folks like to keep to themselves and we kind of discourage *auslanders* (sp?) from cluttering up our space with their vacuous, annoying bullshit.

Still, at certain times of the year it's really crazy around here. The stupid bloody tourists are everywhere, like ticks. Do you have tourists in Arkham? What are some of the local sights? Just wondering...

I'll close off for now and merely add that I hope this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship, pardner!

Sincerely,

Russell Q. Hewitt

P.S. Do you have much stuff by Giger? And I really like that guy J.K. Potter. I actually have nightmares about my fingers coming to life on their own. Waking up and they're already clawing at my throat. You know what I mean? RQH

**August 10, 1996**

Dear Stanley:

Call this a supplementary order. Call this a "holy shit Russ Hewitt can't believe how much good shit he left in the Gryphon Books catalogue after his first, paltry order" spasm attack!

Enclose another hefty sum and an itemized listing of my purchases and their retail prices (again, postage calculated & included):

<i>Did Six Million Really Die?</i>	\$ 8.00
<i>Tales From The Clit</i> (Cherie Matrix)	12.00
<i>The Cunt Coloring Book</i> (T. Corinne)	10.00
<i>NASA, Nazis &amp; JFK</i> (Kenn Thomas)	18.95
<i>Hitler &amp; Stalin: Parallel Lives</i>	22.00
<i>"Spank Me, Fuck Me"</i> (An S & M Reader)	16.00
<i>Blue-eyed Christ</i> (A Revisionist Look At the Bible)	12.99

Just looking at that roster of titles is enough to set a confirmed book-lover like myself to *drooling*. Hope these are all in stock and will be keeping one *very* anxious eye out for the mail over the next little while, believe you me!

By the way, I had a buddy of mine do an Internet search for Arkham and he came up with lots of hits, of course, but nothing for Arkham, California. Are you anywhere near Mount Shasta? Gordie said that's where your zip code figures you to be. Am I getting warm?

All the best to you,

Sincerely,

Russell Q. Hewitt

P.S. Yes, *bears really do shit in the woods!!!* The other day I was out walking and came upon this big old mangey sow doing her business and (fortunately) paying me no mind. Grunting like a trooper. The smell was *incredible* (almost hallucinogenic clarity). Beautiful moment, man. Nature in its most raw.

## August 25, 1996

Dear Stanley:

I received your truly warped card about a week ago, updating the status of my orders. Glad to hear something's on its way.

Nope, this place is nowhere near Prince Rupert—so you're *wayyyy* off there. We're much more discreet and out of the way. You'd need one of those U.S. spy satellites to find us. The ones that can register a mouse farting from 18,000 miles up (ha ha!).

As I already said, I really dug the card you sent. Very foreboding and Lovecraftian, dude. Didn't see the name of the artist but whoever it was sure gave me a chill. There's this sense that there's something lurking just off to the side, something *almost* about to leap into the open and reveal itself in all its inhuman glory. The best Lovecraft is like that. Of



course, when he actually tries to describe what his boogeymen look like, he can't write worth a crap. He has to make up the words. Or, better yet, leave it unsaid. *Unspeakable*.

Forgot to ask last time: do you have any books on Gilles de Rais?

Also medical and/or anatomy texts, car crash injuries, dissection, etc.

The weather here has been really lousy lately. How's it been down your way? Where the heck is "down your way", anyway (ha ha)?

Be well, my friend. Ta!

Your friend (and devoted patron),

Russell Q. Hewitt

## September 8, 1996

Dear Stanley:

I nearly had a heart attack when I came around front today and saw a box sitting out there all lonesome and wet on the end of the dock. We've been getting pissed on with this steady drizzle here for the past week and I thought that whatever it was would be soaked right through.

But I have to commend the packing job you did. You used a good quality box and lots of packing tape and, as a result, everything was pretty much watertight. I don't know why John or Aggie didn't bother throwing some plastic over it or lugging it up to the porch. (?!!!)

I guess they thought I was home but, as luck would have it, I've been sleeping in the great outdoors for the past three or four days. Grabbed my backpack and sleeping bag and decided to rough it for a while, just to clear my head. Beans for breakfast, beans for dinner and acute gastritis to keep the cold nights lively. Do you ever have to get away from things, Stanley? Or are you basically a peaceful, laidback person? It's hard to tell from your cards and short notes.

You're obviously a person who believes that people should read whatever they darn well want and that it's your job to satisfy just about every taste there is. Can there be a higher calling than that?

...and, thanks to you, right now I'm sitting here, all warm and dry for the first time in bloody *days* and I've got the fire going, CBC Radio (on my cheap Radio Shack shortwave) playing some Bach for me and, oh yeah, I'm looking at a book with a photograph of a man suspended from his nipples and shrieking in either agony or exultation. Like that Russian comic used to say: "What a country!"

Sincerely,

Russ Hewitt

**November 14, 1996**

Dear Stanley:

Your so-called "Christmas Catalogue" is an abomination against everything that is decent and pure in the world. I LOVE IT! You'll be lucky if They (the Vatican, the feminists, the political correctness thought police, the liberals, etc.) don't burn you at the stake!

You've got the latest issue of *Grimmstone*, with autopsy photos of JFK and Lassie (ouch! I'll take one, please!). You've got a novel that purports to be an unwholesome collaboration between my two ultimate literary demi-gods, Lucy Taylor and Eddie Lee (the thing will likely burst into flames in my hands—I'll grab 2 copies of that puppy, one for Aggie, who could likely use a good jolt). And let us not forget an *awesome* collection of poetry by the much-maligned Ed Kemper (wasn't he the evil genius that came up with that great line—I'm paraphrasing—about how when he sees a great-looking chick part of him wants to ask her out and the other part wonders what her head would look like on a stick? Now *that's* poetry, my friend!)

Another money order will soon be on its way (thanks, Postman John!) and may I say that, with the Christmas season coming up, I hope Kris Kringle looks kindly on whacked out, weirdo booksellers this year.

All my best, buddy.

Sincerely,  
Russ Hewitt

**December 10, 1996**

Dear Stanley:

Just a quick card to say "thanks" for being you and for running the world's greatest fucking bookstore in a small town somewhere in California that apparently doesn't exist any more than this fictitious (sp?) island of mine does.

Let's raise our glasses to enigmas, shall we?

Happy holidays and take care, big guy!

Yours very sincerely,  
Russ Hewitt

December 29, 1996

Dear Stanley:

Got a real bugger of a storm blowing up outside again—seems like the weather here has been lousy for the past *month*. It's been especially atrocious for the last twenty-four hours or so. I've been completely house-bound, listening to the wind howling and feeling the cold seeping right through the cracks in the walls. Keeping the fire going has become an all-day, all-night proposition.

And meanwhile, my mind is racing a mile a minute, thinking about my *livelihood*, totally obsessing about my traps and snares, as in wondering if something worthwhile will stumble into them. Especially on a night like this, with this murderous, driving, blinding sleet. I'm not sure what your feelings are about this but I figure I might as well own up to it right now:

I live off the land, off of whatever she gives me. When she's feeling bountiful, I celebrate, and when she's being stingy (sp?) and spiteful, like right now, I make do. I never take more than I need and I use every scrap. I was composting long before the media got on the bandwagon about it, believe you me!

I find I can make do on very little. Except books. My brain has *got* to have a steady supply of words just to give it something to work on. I can't *stand* not having a book on the go. I'm a very smart person with way above-average I.Q. Being alone and isolated is sometimes good but sometimes it can also be a pretty mind-altering experience.

For instance, (and not to freak you completely out), I find that my senses are *unreal*. My sense of smell, my eyesight, just absolutely 20/20. After a while up here in the bush, you develop your instincts and you *know* when something's coming, moving through the trees—but what you *don't* know is whether it's friend or foe. That's the adreneline rush, man.

No order this time. Just wanted to tell you I was thinking about you as it's Christmas (or thereabouts) and all that. You've made an important contribution to my life and I believe you should acknowledge these things when you have the time and opportunity.

Got your Christmas card, you sick bugger. Was that really Kurt Cobain's face (what was left of it)? You'd better hope Courtney doesn't get ahold of you. Again, helluva jolt when I opened that sumbitch up. It's a pleasure to have the acquaintance of a fellow *sicko*.

Talk to you again next year, buddy.

Sincerely,

On a dark & stormy night, somewhere off the west coast of Canada,  
Russ



**January 28, 1997**

Dear Stanley:

I was on the verge of writing you a short note, wondering if you had maybe not received my pre-Christmas order, when I heard the telltail “putt-putt” of John Dunham’s pitiful one-horse motorboat. I’m exaggerating but you’d laugh if you ever saw the thing. Aggie absolutely forbids him to take it out of sight of shore and even *that* might be pushing his luck.

I went outside to meet him and found myself so shocked by the way he looked, I almost dropped your box when he went to hand it up to me from his rickety-ass boat. He looked so awful that I could hardly bear to look at him. Like I may have told you, John is no spring chicken but he’s still a man to be reckoned with. Well, at least he *used* to be. Six months ago he was spry and strong but it seems like almost overnight he’s changed into this shaky old man with grey skin and puffy eyes and the smell of death all over him. He’s slipping away, man, *and he knows it*.

When he talked, I had to bend down close to hear him. He told me he was feeling pretty much shot and that he and Aggie were shutting up their cottage and moving down to Nanaimo to be near their kids. He asked me if I wanted to buy his boat. “For collecting the mail.” He kept reaching up and patting my arm with his cold, boney fingers. We were both crying. Because we both know that John *belongs* here. He’s like me. He’ll never be happy anywhere else.

God, I wish I could do something for the poor guy.

Stanley, words from the wise: *always make sure that no matter where you are, you’re always in a place where you belong.*

So sayeth this Soothsayer.

Thinthereby,  
Ruth

**January 29, 1997**

Dear Stanley:

I just finished tossing a very depressing note I wrote you yesterday into the cleansing fire of my wood stove. Nobody needs that kind of shit, right?

It’s been a pretty heavy time around here and maybe I’ll tell you about it sometime ... but not right now (it would just bum us both out).

Instead let me just say how much I appreciated the latest package of books. Thanks for the note too—it just kills me that you are just as

interested in where *I* live as I am in *your* purported location in real time and space.

As for your card, with its brief and puzzling salutation, it is truly repellant and horrific. I'm only glad my dear, departed mother (devoured from within by cancer eight blissful years ago) isn't alive today to see a world that produces something so graphic and irredeemably fucking evil. "The Death Room of Mary Ann Nichols." Hmmm. Wasn't she one of Jack the Ripper's victims? Have to say, you have to admire the artful savagery of this poor woman's killer. Speaking on a purely clinical basis, of course!

I'm wondering: do you ever get any complaints about your cards? I have pretty extreme tastes but even *I* have to admit, they sometimes set off my "ick-o-meter" big time. Is that the intention? To shock for the sake of shocking? Not that I'm finding fault with your motivations, just kind of wondering where you're coming from.

Pee Ess. You give me some kind of idea where Arkham is and *I'll* point out (roughly) the location of my personal Avalon which, oh, yes indeed, is a *very* real place, paradise on earth, touched by very few human hands, where the old gods still wander freely and the sky is always crying.

Due to the impending move of John and Aggie, there might be some problems with the mail for the next while so I'll hold off on orders for now. *Wherever I am*, I'm pretty remote and things like a steady supply of asswipe and regular mail are luxuries, not to be taken for granted.

And wherever you are, I send my best wishes, for 1997...and beyond.

Sincerely,  
Russ Hewitt

**March 3, 1997**

Dear Stanley:

Well, through wind or rain or across storm-tossed straits...

I thought to Hell with it, today's the day, so I took John's little pissant boat (he ended up giving it to me) and made directly for Sawich. The crossing was a bit breezy but I made it, thanks to favourable winds, in just over a couple of hours. After which, I picked up the mail—including some girly mags and, hooo baby! the latest box from Gryphon Books. Then I bought two bags of Cheezies, a couple of doughnuts, waved to the assembled well-wishers (three foul sea birds and the spreading corpse of something that might have once been a seal), hopped aboard my tiny boat and toddled off back home again.

Brrrr, it was *cold*. But, brrrr, it was worth it. Because I am now in possession of some terrific books that promise to rock my world. Thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou! Even if I die of triple pneumonia, it'll have been worth it. Stanley, without you, life would have no meaning. Take care and keep in touch—

Sincerely (gratefully),  
Russ

**March 20, 1997**

Stanley:

Still have the other letter I wrote to you over on the table—I can see it from here—but (obviously) haven't yet gotten around to making another trip to semi-civilization.

I've been feeling kind of poorly off and on for awhile, weak and light-headed. It may be that I ate some bad meat. Not to gross you out but you should never take shortcuts with your preparation. You can't afford to get lazy with the curing and the smoking and salting or what have you. Do you have any/know of any good books on dressing venison and wild game? I'll bet that would be of interest to some of your readers. Also: anything on intestinal parasites—how about RE/Search's *Bodily Fluids* issue?

I'm curious: did you get many orders for *The Kama Sutra For Quadriplegics* (pg. 14)? Offering something like that really helps restore my faith in humanity because we're only going to keep growing and developing as a species if we have access to all sorts of alternative lifestyles. It's not my particular cup of tea but, hey, different strokes for different folks, as far as I'm concerned!

Whatever happened to Amok Press and Loompanics? They used to have really *extreme* catalogues too. Sorry, I'm babbling but basically the only thing I can do right now (besides retch and twitch with cold sweats) is sit around here with this old portable Brother typewriter, pecking away and free associating (at your expense) to beat Hell.

No card in with the last catalogue. Hope I didn't bum you out or anything. I can have that effect on people. That's why I live out here in the middle of nowhere, where I can't get on too many people's cases.

Hey, do you know the difference between a good book and a good woman? A good book knows when to *shut the fuck up*. On that note (always leave 'em laughing),

Your friend (I hope),  
Russ Hewitt



P.S. I guess I want to clarify re: your “far-out” postcards. I totally and utterly defend your constitutional right to free speech and all that, dig? But...answer me this: *Are there any limits?* For instance (and I’m not accusing), aren’t you responsible for the books you flog? Can stuff like *The Anarchist Cookbook* or *The Joy Of Non-consensual Sex* actually do serious *harm*? I don’t know but I’m always open to debate. How about it?

**April 4, 1997**

Dear Stanley:

There are now *two* unmailed letters to you on the table by the door but the good news is there’s a guy coming by in a little while to chat about a business proposition and I’m sure he won’t mind mailing some stuff for me. Especially if I make it worth his while.

You’d love this guy, Stanley. His name is Terry the Hippie and he is known locally for two reasons: the first is his well-known fondness for interdimensional travel. In the parlance (sp?), he is crazy for dem ‘shrooms. The deal is that I let him hunt around on my little island for anything that might alter his consciousness and in return he’ll do things like bring me smokes and liquor (trying to quit both) and make the occasional mail run for me.

I’m giving him a note for the good folks at Canada Post at Sawich so they’ll let him collect my mail. But I don’t think they’ll give him much of a hassle about it. You see, the second thing that Terry is known for is that he has this thing against washing himself. As a direct result, he has the *worst* body odour imaginable. No one can withstand his physical proximity for more than 30 seconds at a time, I kid you not. Sometimes you’d swear the guy is actually decomposing, it gets so bad. But, hey, you know what? Wherever Terry goes, he always gets immediate and great service. You have to hand it to him for that.

He’s a great guy though.

Glad to be finally getting these letters off to you. Will keep you informed of future developments.

Sincerely,  
Russ

P.S. I promised Terry a good book on mushroom cultivation—can you comply?

May 27, 1997

Dear Stanley:

Thanks to Terry the Hippie, I now get mail and newspaper delivery directly to my door at least once a week. My hirsuit (sp?) new postman isn't nearly as friendly and out-going as John or Aggie were (and he smells a whole helluva lot worse) but just this morning he brought me a huge swack of magazines and goodies so I guess I can't complain...

...including, the latest Gryphon Books catalogue, with that distinctive (unsettling) logo on the envelope. Tonight, I've been skimming through that baby as well as a couple of back issues of *Soldier Of Fortune* while making good progress on the pint of Irish whiskey Terry was decent enough to bring me (yet another weakness of mine).

In all honesty, what I *don't* like about the current arrangement is that I never know exactly when Terry is coming by. He is irregular in his thought patterns, the direct result of certain fungal excesses we need not delve into here. *He also never fucking stops talking!!!* All of which could lead to major problems down the road but I'm trying not to get too far ahead of myself.

All I really need is the bugger's *boat* (it'd be a big improvement on John's old beater). I'm thinking I should convince him to sell it to me. The weather's been pretty nice lately and with his tub I could make it to Sawich in an hour, maybe less. I guess it wouldn't hurt to at least ask. The worst he can do is say "no." But I have a feeling I'll be able to convince him. I'll just use my (in)famous powers of persuasion on him.

Sincerely,  
Russ

P.S. Okay, it's now a couple of hours later and I was just cleaning up and I picked up your envelope, the big white one the catalogue came in...and out slides your latest card which I guess I somehow missed. Lucky me.

Man, I honestly don't know what to say to you. If this is real then it is *too* real, if you get my meaning. I can do autopsy photos and car wreck scenes and from my own life I can tell you about shit that would absolutely make your hair stand on end. Or maybe not. After looking at this card it makes me realize that you must be a pretty jaded, borderline individual. Again, I have to ask you, Stanley—is there such a thing as going *too far*?

I guess at this point I'd have to say: YES.

I'll probably get back to the catalogue later but right now I can't get my mind off this bloody card.

For tonight, at least (to paraphrase the bard), you have murdered sleep.

Russ

**August 11, 1997**

Dear Stanley:

Got your card. I *guess* it's an improvement over the last one. Sort of.

And, yeah, you're right, it's been a while since my last order but there have been many things weighing on my mind.

I have been keeping myself very busy. It's tourist season (still), and the islands around here have been swarming with eco-nuts and campers. I have been working pretty steadily, to the extent that I have had to build another smokehouse, this one a lot bigger and set further back in the trees. It seems like I never stop, from dawn to dusk. All work and no play...

...and not much more to say.

Hope business is booming.

Have a great summer, okay?

Sincerely,

Russell Q. Hewitt

P.S. Returning the book on mushroom cultivation for credit. Terry the Hippie is now officially "missing in action" (long story) but at least he left me his boat. Been too busy for reading (or anything else) so no order this time. Sorry. Hope business is good. Take care. RQH

**September 15, 1997**

Dear Mr. Schaefer:

Your latest card was blank inside, not even signed.

No words necessary, huh?

Stanley, I've seen some pretty fucking sick shit in my life but this card pretty much takes the cake. I'll be dead honest with you and tell you that it's gotten to the point where I no longer look forward to receiving any kind of correspondence from your establishment.

I think it would be better for both of us concerned if we stopped communicating with each other. I can tell by this card (and others of the



same ilk) the type of person I'm dealing with now and I'm no longer amused. Just pissed off and extremely disappointed and wierded out.

Please consider our business and personal relationship at an end.

I wish you well.

Sincerely,

(and for the last time),

Russell Q. Hewitt

P.S. My buddy Gordie sent me a news clipping he downloaded off the net that mentions Arkham. I guess there's been a lot of forest fires in your area. Now at least I know where it is so I can make sure never to come within 100 miles of the place!

**November 17, 1997**

Dear Stanley:

I picked up your latest card with the rest of my mail today. At first I wasn't going to open it, but then I got curious and so...

What can I say?

*You win.*

It doesn't matter *how* you found me or how you managed to poke around out here without me catching wind of you. It's clear that I have completely underestimated you. There is no limit to your capabilities and I am left with a real and lasting appreciation of your special talents. My compliments to you, sir!

I guess at this point the only thing to do is throw myself at your mercy.

With a few clicks of your devious shutter, you have uncovered the skeletons in my closet (or, in this case, my smokehouse) and taken away all the safety and security I've worked so long and hard to maintain. When I look at these pictures, it's like suddenly I'm viewing it all from another, totally different perspective.

Because now I actually *see* what I've done and have an inkling of what I represent in the eyes of the rest of the world. And I can't help it, I am left wondering what type of mind could do such things and be so methodical, knowing all along that it isn't *right*, that I'm committing acts of desecration and sacrelege (sp?) ...and yet doing it anyway, humming and even *smiling* to myself as I carry on with my cruel and despicable work.

Do you know what I mean?

But I guess what it comes down to, the single most important thing

right now is that you have discovered my dirty little secret and have made your awesome knowledge known to me. And in return I must learn to accept this new reality and do my best to come to terms with it. Let me state for the record (as it were) that I don't think there will be any further misunderstandings, at least on my end.

I am enclosing an itemized (and fairly lengthy) list of books I would like to purchase from you and once I get to the post office I'll send you a money order for the full amount owing.

Please let me know if this sum is sufficient for your present requirements. If not, I am sure we can come to a more satisfactory arrangement.

I am, of course, entirely reliant on your discretion and goodwill and wish to acknowledge as much at this time.

I shall look forward with great anticipation to your next communication and humbly await any further instructions.

Sincerely and respectfully,

Russell Quentin Hewitt •

*(for Mark Ziesing)*



# Choosing the way of pain: a dialogue on *Lord of the Rings*

Steve Mohn & Peter Watts

*MUCH HAS BEEN SAID OF PETER JACKSON'S TAKE ON J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S Lord of the Rings, and to say more may feel a day late. DVDs sold with the films are crammed with extras, and websites abound. It has made more money than anything else, ever, and everyone loves it. So when the relevant essay I had promised On Spec crumbled like stale cake in my clumsy hands, Jena Snyder, our production editor, suggested a dialogue with Peter Watts, long associated with this magazine, author of the SF trilogy Starfish, Maelstrom, and Behemoth, and a guy who, Jena assured me, really knew his Tolkien. I leaped at this since I don't know anything and can always afford to learn something new.*

*New because this would not be two guys sitting at a table, nor even two e-mailers batting epistles back and forth in shuttlecock imitation of a transcribed dialogue. Days, not minutes, passed between replies. Each is a small essay, not so much worked as meditated on, with scarcely any cuts. We could go where we wished, yank the discussion in whatever direction. The only rule was that we had to have seen the films.*

*You may have to chew your way through parts of what we ended up with but,*



*between my own solemn trench-digging and Peter under full sail, running before the wind, we have talked about Jackson's Rings in a fashion unlike what you are liable to find elsewhere. And so then...*

**Steve Mohn:** It may seem unfair to complain that *The Lord of the Rings* is not an important film, even if it is a terrific movie, but I think it has to be faced that, in a lot of ways, *Lord of the Rings* isn't really a film at all, and that Peter Jackson is not our Kubrick, even if *Lord of the Rings* is his *Spartacus*. *Lord of the Rings* is an ordinary epic. It doesn't have style so much as production design, and lots of films have that. You never get the sense with *Lord of the Rings* that you're watching a man work with film, unearthing inherent cinematic problems the way composers leave musical problems for later composers to pick up and solve. Jackson's camera rarely finds where it has to be in order to fulfill some purpose greater than scene coverage. Think of Kubrick's dolly shots, those long takes prefiguring so much New German Cinema, and his rare resorts to close-ups, so that every close-up punctuates the scene. Or think of how, in *A Clockwork Orange*, Alex is held head-underwater by former Droogs, now cops, as they beat him with truncheons. It's a direct violation of Chaplin's maxim: Close-up for tragedy, long shot for comedy—the Kubrick shot *is* a long shot, yet it's a tragic moment for Alex, but at the same time darkly comic for us. This friction between stylistic imperatives is devastating. Kubrick often violated film to make us laugh at what was not funny, to make us sit through a nightmare. He was film-making, and *Lord of the Rings* never quite does anything like that. Instead, it faithfully illustrates a much-beloved novel, which, incidentally, I've never read. I have to lay those cards on the table.

**Peter Watts:** Stop. Rewind. Ask yourself: why should a mere "movie" aspire to the exalted status of "film" in the first place? So that viewers can be yanked out the story and forced to dwell upon the precious technicalities of camera technique and inbred homage? What is the director's job, ultimately: to immerse us in another world, or to show us how clever he is? Is that the difference between *movies* and *films*—one aspires to engross us into forgetting that it's an artifact, while the other keeps reminding us of that same fact?

Don't misunderstand. I creamed my pants at the sight of 2001's bone/spacehip cut. Alex's myopic glower sent chills up my spine. I'm even willing to appreciate the little red staccatos punctuating every other shot of *Eyes Wide Shut*, although I don't know what the fuck Kubrick was trying to prove with that. But I was also blown away by the lighting of the

mountain beacons in *Return of the King*. To me, that sequence is no less masterful for not having prefigured New German Cinema, or for not having tipped its hat to Fritz Lang. It moved me, on a gut level. It took my breath away in the same way that Kubrick's bone-cut did.

It's the goal that matters, not the tools used to achieve it. If the impossible operation succeeds—"if the patient recovers and thrives against all odds"—who are we to complain that Bergman would have used a different scalpel in the third act?

There are so many things you could have done, so many real weaknesses you could have exploited. You could have attacked Tolkien for his reliance on *deus ex machinas* like giant eagles and dead armies, none of which we ever heard of until they conveniently appeared, like gizmos from Batman's utility belt, to save asses in the nick of time. You could have attacked Jackson for the changes he wrought—the Ents' peculiar ignorance of a clearcut only thirty seconds' walk away, or the movie's trivialization of Saruman's "work for good within an evil system" rationale—seductive and *reasonable*—down to the bwa-ha-ha cardboard villainy. You could have attacked plot holes, inconsistencies, even the military absurdities rife in both book and films: no drawbridge at Helm's Deep? Defensive gates that swing *inward*? A catflap in the Hornburg?

But no. You have chosen to fixate on some arcane distinction between "movie" and "film," a trifle that matters only to film-studies undergrads and fact-checkers for the Boomer's edition of Trivial Pursuit.

You have chosen the way of *pain*.

**SM:** The director's job is whatever he says it is but increasingly all directors do is illustrate, and Peter Jackson's doting on the source material ultimately does it a disservice. After a while, all those guys on horseback, galloping like mad past picturesque mountain ranges, start to feel the same. And I'm not looking for something artsy here: let's remember that the bone-to-satellite cut in *2001* is just a scene change striking for its economy, eliminating the march-through-the-ages *montage* Kubrick originally intended: his desire to get rid of that resulted in the metaphor of progress supported by the bones of murder.

Here's the thing I'm really getting at, and where I think Jackson truly let us down. It's about silent film as the Base Language of cinema, and how it's disappearing. Guys like Kubrick and David Lean learned cutting and camera work from watching silents, and it shows in things like *2001* and *Lawrence of Arabia*. And it's interesting that Jackson did so much digital tinting of the images in *Lord of the Rings*—making the night scenes almost monochromatically blue, the Rivendell scenes golden, while

desaturating the daylight scenes nearly to the point of their becoming black and white. The tinting is old silent technique from before the days of color—they did it by hand. (Jackson did a mock-umentary for New Zealand TV, proving that film was actually invented there, so he knows all about this stuff.) But Tolkien's text is such a straightjacket, and so driven by the spoken word, that the film has no choice but to hack its way from scene to scene with a broadsword of stated intentions.

The only time he really slows down to do something special of his own is when Elrond warns Arwen what will become of her life if she marries Aragorn: the color almost leaves the scene and Jackson pulls back slowly from a stone bier wearing Aragorn's death effigy. It's nearly a black-and-white still and it's the most memorable shot in *Two Towers*. It's appropriate.

**PW:** Okay, I can see where you're coming from *vis-à-vis* the galloping cavalry cavalcade. I don't agree, necessarily—each charge was, to my eye, distinctive enough to stand out from the others—but, yes. There are only so many ways to make huge honking hordes of horses look different.

What I don't understand is your claim that Jackson let us down—or, more precisely, with the way you tied this to the death of the Old Ways. Your underlying premise seems to be that modern film is best served by using techniques from a bygone era. Even if I accept that at face value (although I'd like to see you make the same arguments in other fields—medicine, for example), don't your own examples show that Jackson is giving the past its due? Don't his "almost monochromatic" treatment of various locales tip their hat to the silent masters? What am I missing here?

In fact, Tolkien's text was not nearly the straitjacket you seem to think. That evocative scene at Aragorn's grave never happened in the main text. Jackson pulled it out of one of Tolkien's appendices, and polished a couple of throwaway paragraphs into the little gem you see on screen. Aragorn's inner conflict, his reluctance to assume the mantle of leadership? Not Tolkien. 100% Walsh, Boyens, and Jackson.

The film abandons major episodes from the books. It shuffles written timelines without mercy. Characters are merged and split, motivations and attributes retooled. I would quibble with some of these changes—I have, above—but overall I'd say that Jackson improved on the original. Yes, there were problems with Tolkien's text; but Jackson was too good a director to let them interfere with the story. And while the films have their failings, I cannot describe them as flaws in direction.

I'd agree wholeheartedly that Arwen's graveyard watch was memora-



ble, but I found equally memorable shots throughout all three films. The swooping camera work that started off *The Two Towers*, taking us smoothly from the stratosphere into the very heart of the Misty Mountains. The Balrog in free-fall. Gollum and Smeagol, arguing. Pippin serenading Denethor while the troops ride to their deaths. I've already mentioned the lighting of the beacons. I could go on (I usually do). I honestly don't understand what makes any of these scenes less accomplished than the quiet despair at Aragorn's graveside.

Of course, I'm no expert, no formal student of film history. I didn't even know that Kubrick had intended a four-million-year montage between bone and bomb, which is especially embarrassing since *2001* remains one of my all-time favorite films. But presumably the Director's Guild of America does have some level of expertise in these matters, and they just handed Jackson this year's award for Best Director. That's gotta be good for something.

**SM:** What you call the "Old Ways" of cinema, of interest only to bean counters, misstates my underlying premise, which has less to do with some nameless bygone era than with the everlasting value of rhetoric. When you say it's the goal that matters, i.e. the content, and not the tools used to achieve its evocation, you might as well say a building can stand without reliance on girders or stone foundations: it's all just floors and windows, the parts we actually pay attention to. In other words, we're somehow expected to read a book or watch a film strictly for its manifest content, while treating the rhetorical method as irrelevant or, at best, transparent. Strunk and White have for years celebrated a see-through prose style that only bureaucrats actually write in. There's not a writer in the Western Canon whose prose style does not in fact leap off the page and sing. Must we now claim to see films with no regard to images, with no regard to texture or composition—the very things that *make images into images*—just as if there somehow exists, underneath the images, a true and verifiable content independent of them? My good man, that way madness lies! Next you'll say good style is like good breeding: it never draws attention to itself. But you don't write that way, and I don't write that way, and neither did Mr. Hemingway. You would be hard-pressed as well to find any film in what's becoming a global canon of cinema that anyone lauds for being stylistically sedate. In fact, insistence on the transparent style is one of the great hypocrisies of our age: no one actually works in it but everyone cheers on the notion just as if it were legitimate, and not merely a salve for mediocrity. But I digress.

Look. I liked watching this movie. I could see in every frame not only

that Jackson is a hell of a talented man, not only that he is also just plain bright enough to want to get the look and feel of the story absolutely nailed down in terms of color desaturation and monochromatic tinting—wanting those things as much as Kubrick wanted space to be silent and without gravity—but also the kind of filmmaker who could have done more of what he had it in himself to do, if he didn't also have to answer to the fans of Tolkien, of whom Jackson is one himself. I started this off by saying that, alas, Jackson is not our current Kubrick, but I never would have made the comparison if I hadn't instinctively felt he belonged at the same table, or will one day. He is really good and tried very hard to do something almost impossible to do.

I still take issue with his camera work. Too much of it is Modern Slapdash, a style much in vogue at MTV (if they're still around) but pioneered by Robert Altman (who is still around). Altman realized a long time ago, when everyone worked with a zoom lens strapped on the camera, that if you just kept zooming in or out you could cut from any zoom shot to any other kind of shot, without regard to composition, movement or distance from the subject. It forgives so much. Now we know that if you just keep moving the camera—spin it, keep swooping up or down, keep throwing or dropkicking it over the barn—you can cut from any shot to any other. It's given us *The Big Scribble*, in which there is no consistent *idea* behind the lens, no *eye*, like a writer with no voice. Jackson's camera does everything, and runs the risk of doing nothing. And whether or not you're a film student is immaterial: you are affected by these things. You can't *not* be affected by rhetorical devices, good or bad, written or filmed.

**PW:** I'm a huge fan of style. It surprises me that you'd interpret my argument as a dismissal of style, whether cinematic or literary. In fact, I've always resented those "transparent" writers who (stylistically speaking) couldn't write their way out of a fortune cookie, while at the same time racking up sales figures orders of magnitude greater than anything I've ever achieved.

My view is not that cinema—or any other form of art—should be bereft of style. My view is that Peter Jackson's *Rings* trilogy has style to burn, whether or not it meets the stylistic conventions of bygone days (or even present days, for that matter). I judge the work on its own terms, not Fritz Lang's, and I don't find it scribbly or unfocused. I find it downright *moving* in places, so much so that I expect to get the same lumps in my throat when I go to see *Return of the King* for the eighth time as I did the other seven.

The thing is, movies are *not* houses. Houses have, yes, girders and foundations and other vital things beyond windows; but movies themselves *are* windows. Whatever the technology that produces them, whatever the cinematic legacy that any given work builds upon—in the end, all that matters is up there on the screen. All that matters is whether those sights and sounds work in service of the tale; there is no hidden dry rot, no badly-placed support beams that would allow an expert eye to think “Sure it all looks solid *now*, but by this time next year half the frames will have collapsed.”

I can accept the house-equals-movie analogy only so far: if a house is built along unsound engineering principals it will fall apart, just as a movie assembled with no regard for the rules of cinema will fail. But one need not be an architect to know what a collapsed house looks like; why must one have formal training in the History of Cinema to recognize the wreckage of a failed movie? (I’ll grant that film scholars would certainly have an edge at understanding *why* a given work has failed.)

We may never agree on this. You cited Hemingway as an author whose prose leaps off the page and sings; I’d cite as him as a member of the Western Canon whose transparent, style-free prose has always bored me to tears. That both of us could cite the same author to support such utterly opposite positions makes me wonder if we haven’t somehow strayed into the reaches of religious argument. But I think that at least two telling points have emerged from this dialog: 1) that we could argue endlessly about the merits and failings of Jackson’s trilogy, and 2) that Jackson’s trilogy is *worth* arguing about.

As I recall, movies like *2001* provoked the same sort of heated discussion in their day. •



*"Are you taking the piss?"*

*"Yes. 'Bout time you got an apprenticeship an' stopped pissin' around with that twilight zone shite!"*

# View of a Remote Country

Karen Traviss

THE AUDIO TAPE HAD BEEN THE HARDEST THING TO GET, BUT he'd found it in one of those freak magazines you saw people with green hair and pierced lips buying in Smith's. He'd had to ask one of the weirdoes to point it out to him, though. The table tennis ball and the red light bulb had been much easier to buy.

It seemed a pretty simple kit for reaching out into the paranormal. Evan cut the ball into two halves with some difficulty. The eggshell plastic was tougher than he'd thought, and he didn't want jagged edges sticking into his eyelids. So he filed down the rim of each hemisphere with one of Annie's emery boards and checked it with his fingertip. Then he put his chair into a reclining position, plumped up the cushions, and made sure the door was locked.

He didn't want Annie walking in on him. It would have meant a lot of explanations. He switched off the room light, flicked on the lamp with

the red bulb, and lay down to let the Walkman feed shapeless noise into his ears.

He hesitated before covering his eyes: he must have looked a complete dickhead. But the halves of the ball fitted over his eyes without too much discomfort and he forgot how daft it was.

The non-noise washed over him and his closed eyes couldn't detect even the usual wash of colored flashes. It was emptiness, total and complete nothing.

He could see better now. Much, much better.

"It's true, I tell you. You can stick a pin in a map and concentrate on it and you can see the place in your mind."

Evan sat swinging his legs over the edge of the scaffolding, which he knew was a daft thing to do nine stories up, but it helped him think. He ate his packed lunch with the bricklaying gang and with Kev in particular. They didn't mess around. Half an hour's break, and they'd be right back on the job, because they got paid by what they finished during the day. They were an elite, like plasterers. He wanted that sort of respected skill someday. He wanted to be more than a builder's laborer.

"Give over," sneered Kev.

"It's true. The American secret service used it for years. It was on telly at Christmas. On BBC2." If it had been on the BBC, it *had* to be true: Evan was getting annoyed. Why wouldn't people believe him? "It's called remote viewing."

"You're the bleedin' remote one."

"I tell you the Americans spent millions on it because they thought the Russians were using it. They reckon they got results from it, looking inside Russian army bases, but of course they won't talk about it now."

"Well, they wouldn't, would they?"

"Are you taking the piss?"

"Yes. 'Bout time you got an apprenticeship an' stopped pissin' around with that twilight zone shite," said Kev.

Evan bristled. "It's not shite, it's science." But Annie said it was shite too, although that wasn't the word she used. And Kev had a recent registration second-hand BMW, so he was a man to be listened to. "You have to train yourself for it."

"How? Pin-holdin' classes?"

"No, you clear your mind by going into a deeply relaxed state by shutting out outside noise and light."

"How'd you do that?"

Evan was so caught up in the explaining that he didn't even stop to

think. "You play white noise on your Walkman and you put two halves of a table tennis ball over your eyes and use a red light in the room. It's like *total sensory deprivation*." He hoped he'd said that right. "You can even do telepathy while you're in it."

Kev looked at him. For a moment Evan thought he was thinking about remote viewing seriously. Then Kev burst out laughing and sprayed bits of egg sandwich from a great height.

"You're off your 'ead," he said. "Table tennis balls. Bollocks, more like."

Lunch was over. Evan grabbed the scaffold rail and pulled himself inboard again, chastened and regretful. He wouldn't mention it again.

But he wished he wasn't the only one on the site who watched documentaries. It was lonely liking clever stuff.

Evan hadn't had a great deal of success with the map visioning, but that was because he couldn't find a way of checking what he thought he saw against what was really there. He needed someone to check the places for him. But finding the right person round here was a bit of a problem. On the way home he picked up a large haddock, chips and pea fritter from the takeaway and wandered back to the flat, running the gauntlet of under-tens whose entire range of English seemed to consist of the word *fuck*. It was a relief to get in and put the security chain on the door.

Beyond that point, his world was newly decorated in hint-of-peach emulsion and he could sink into the charcoal velveteen sofa knowing it was clean and that he and Annie had paid for it. It was *remote*. He wished it could be even more remote from this neighborhood.

Annie was working overtime at the 24-hour supermarket. She wanted to earn as much as possible, she said, because that was the only way out of a council flat. Annie, according to his mum, was "getting above herself": she had started taking her job seriously, thinking about applying to be a supervisor, and she had started losing weight and dressing in sober navy blue suits.

Evan had his worries about it too. Annie didn't have to say that it was Evan's fault they only had a council flat, but he heard the rebuke nonetheless. He should have been earning more. He should have done better at school, and got a better job, but he hadn't. He was a failure. And she was getting slim and pretty. How much longer would she want a loser like him?

Only watching TV gave him any self-respect. Since he'd been working on the building site, telly was about all he had the energy for in the evenings. But he found he *liked* the documentaries aimed at clever people,

especially the science ones. Television told him, quietly and privately in his own home, who he really was.

He had the flat to himself. He set up the reclining chair in the front room, swapped the light bulbs and finished his fish and chips watching the six o'clock news. It was like eating your dinner in a submarine at night, all red-lit and unreal. He'd seen that in a documentary too. But it was about the Second World War and he didn't know if modern submarines ever surfaced at night. He'd go and look that up sometime.

The news finished and he listened just long enough to the weather forecast to find out if he'd be working on site tomorrow (partially cloudy and dry, so yes, he would) before squeezing the greasy paper into a tight ball and throwing it in the bin. He paused. Lying at this angle, and looking up out the window, all he could see was treetops against the fading light. The city skyline had disappeared below the level of the windowsill. He could kid himself that he was living in the country.

*Walkman, eye-covers, and relax.* He was getting better at it now. The day's chatter dissolved into a blood-red nothing. He could hear his own pulse, *whoosh-slap, whoosh-slap, whoosh-slap*, and his breathing was easy and deep, as if he could stop it at any time and not feel uncomfortable. Then the intermittent thoughts quieted.

He floated. He waited.

Pictures and sounds came. He was learning to take hold of them very softly so he didn't crush them. There were voices, one of them Annie's, saying how she wished he'd get a grip and earn proper money. She'd told him that before. It was slightly different this time, very distant. He drifted for ages and then time seemed to stop. He took off his eye-shields and looked at the clock. An hour had gone. He felt fine.

Evan was washing up just before the Channel Four documentary was due to start, savoring the bliss of an evening of doing and watching exactly what he wanted, when he began to wonder about it. When he relaxed in the red light and white noise, what was he sensing? Were they his inner thoughts, or were they really someone else's?

It bothered him that Annie's worries had reached into his private red world.

*He needs to start earning real money.*

No, that was what her voice had said. *He.* Not you, *he.* She was talking to someone, or thinking about him. He wasn't remembering a conversation.

Jesus, he'd *sensed* something.

It worked.

Evan was so excited he almost missed the start of the evening's documentary. He slid down into the armchair right on the start of the title



sequence, but his mind, unusually, was not on the program at all.

"Your Annie still working nights?"

"Yeah. Good money."

"Don't you like her or something?"

Evan had started to find the line between keeping embarrassing honesty to himself and yet not lying to Kev. The big bloke knew when he was making things up. Evan shrugged. "I like it better when she's not there going on at me, and besides I can watch anything I want on telly."

Kev grunted approval. "You found that out young."

"I like telly."

Evan spotted the bricks were running low as Kev layered them with an astonishing rhythm: mortar, slap, spread, whump, scrape, mortar, slap, spread, whump, scrape. He tapped the bricks into line with the handle of the trowel with such ease that for a moment Evan thought that the highest aspiration a man could have was to be a master brickie. It was hypnotic. It was like watching a weaver, like he had seen on TV. There was nowhere round here you'd ever see a real live weaver.

It seemed a good time to break the flow of conversation. Evan darted along the flexing scaffold boards and dropped down the ladder to fill the hod with more bricks. That was what he was there for. A brickie's laborer fetched and carried.

"You still on that telepathy thing?" Kev asked, not breaking his rhythm.

"Nah." There, he lied. "Just a laugh."

"Yeah," said Kev, and went on weaving a building.

It wasn't that Annie was a nagger. She just wanted the best for him. Evan walked home through the center of town and pondered on his relationship. Annie was right: he needed to get some skills and take the randomness out of life. Good wages gave you choices, and they both wanted a nice house and some security. If he didn't try catching up with Annie, her ambitions and new figure might take her away from him forever.

At fourteen, she was all he had wanted. At twenty, he had changed. He still wanted Annie, but he wanted himself, too, and it was a self he hadn't known was there when he fell in love with her at school. He had seen amazing things on the telly and they fired feelings in him that his school-teachers never had. Why hadn't they told him about planets with air that could crush you flat and pharaohs who took drugs and Mongolian monks who could sing two tunes at once? The telly was a far better teacher, one

who never called you a failure and always had all the answers.

He'd looked up the word *television* in the dictionary and found that it meant seeing at a distance. It still gave him a flutter of excitement in his chest to think how far he could see from his two-bedroom flat, all thanks to the telly.

He walked past the library, a glass-fronted building spilling bright light that looked as frightening as an expensive fashion shop. People like him didn't go in there. But he stopped to look at the posters taped to the inside of the glass so passers-by could read them.

Among the photocopied sheets telling him about drop-in centers, ward councilors and benefits advice, there was one that caught his eye.

CROP CIRCLES, DOWSING AND LEY LINES? it read. FICTION OR SCIENCE? THE PSI GROUP MEETS TUESDAYS 8PM AT THE ELDON ARMS.

It gave him a strange excitement in his stomach; he memorized the time and place. Next time Annie was working nights, he might even go to a meeting. It was one of those possibilities.

"What are you going to be doing with yourself tonight?" asked Annie. She was pulling on her coat over the top of her Tesco's uniform, about to go on the late shift. "Is there anything good on TV?"

Evan smiled at her fondly. "I thought I'd go down the Eldon." She looked great now, even in her shop clothes. They'd asked her if she wanted to train as a relief checkout supervisor, and he was fiercely proud of her achievement and frightened of it at the same time. He kept her success from his mum. "I haven't been down the pub in ages."

"Well, you enjoy yourself. You ought to, after all that overtime lately."

"I will," he said. It was only a little lie, the pub. It wasn't really a lie at all.

Walking into the Eldon and going up to the Psi Group took every scrap of courage he had. There was a point at which he would rather have picked a fight with someone twice his size than ask someone if he'd come to the right table for crop circles. But he knew he had.

The table was covered in pint pots of murky-looking beer and even the women in the group were saying they'd have a half of Horndean Special Bitter or 6X, and he knew that was real ale.

"I'm Evan," he said.

A beer-drinking woman looked up. "Hi Evan! Glad you could come." The friendliness swept over him like a tidal wave, and he wasn't prepared for it. "What's your special interest, then? Ley lines?"

I'm home, he thought. The far-away place of exciting ideas was right here. "Remote viewing," he said.

"Heavy stuff," said one of the men.

They sat and talked and shared weird experiences and discussed theories. They drank. (And the real ale was another world, too, a lifetime away from his usual lager. This was what students drank, people with an education.) They asked him about remote viewing and he told them how he'd done the mind-clearing telepathy technique with the red light and white noise before trying the stuff with the maps.

Nobody laughed.

In fact, they wanted to know more. Someone called Mick who was studying engineering said he might try that before dowsing next time, and did he have any recommendations about tapes to play? They all talked and talked, and by the time the barman started collecting the glasses and making pointed remarks about having homes to go to, Evan had been invited on a dowsing day and agreed to swap information with at least two other people who said they'd love to work on the remote viewing with him.

He wandered home in ecstasy. It took him ages to drop off to sleep. *Clever people* took him seriously. He found himself giggling like a kid in the darkness.

Evan touched the Ordnance Survey map of the Marlborough area spread out on his kitchen table, just where Mick the student had guided his hand. He shut his eyes.

"What can you see?"

"Er... no trees." The image was up to the left for some reason, or at least he felt his eyes were trying to turn that way. "Just grass. Stones."

There was a pause. "Go on."

"Big shapes." Evan waited a little longer and then opened his eyes. Mick was one of the Psi Group people who'd offered to help out on viewing. They'd been dowsing together the previous weekend. "What was the point on the map, then?"

"Avebury."

"Oh."

"I think that's pretty good."

"Why?"

"You don't know Avebury, do you?"

"No. What is it?"

"It's like Stonehenge. Lots of standing stones."

Evan hoped for a moment that he had seen clearly, just as he thought he had heard Annie in his red and white trance a few months ago. "I could have sort of picked that up without realizing it and seen the map

and just guessed lucky.”

“We can test it.” Mick folded the map up and looked at his watch. Like Evan, he knew Annie was back just after ten every night this week and they had an agreement not to mention the funny stuff in front of her. Just beer. “You know, that’s a good attitude in investigation.”

“What is?”

“Skepticism. Thinking that there might be a more mundane explanation.”

He was comfortable with words like mundane now. “How can we test it?”

“We could find a different map of somewhere that I can see or get pictures of and that you couldn’t know about. Like the inside of a building.”

“Okay. Want to do that Monday? Annie’s back on nights.”

“Fine.” Mick drained his cup of coffee and put the map in his pocket. It was battered, and folded on top of folds, probably from all those crop circle trips. “Has it ever worked for you, that meditation business? The white noise?”

“Sort of. Well, yes.” It was one thing to describe a stone circle, and another to admit you thought you’d heard your girlfriend telling someone you were a useless tosser. Or he might have guessed that as well. “I was sure I’d heard my girlfriend talking about me or thinking about me.”

“Something you could have created from what you already knew?”

Evan nodded sadly. “I’ll try it again. Now that I’m getting in the swing of this.”

“See you Monday then.”

“Yeah. See you.”

Evan wiped up the cups and put them away in the cupboard over the sink. The red bulb was still in the table lamp. He had about twenty minutes until Annie was due in, so he went back into the living room and put the armchair in the recline position. He laid back and plugged in, eyes covered, for one last try tonight because he was in the right mood.

Quiet came. He had a brief glimpse of a holiday in Dawlish as a kid, up in the left of his field of view. The picture had a fuzzy black border. Then he thought of Annie, getting into her J-registration Ford Fiesta, brown leather flying jacket over her uniform. But it didn’t look like Tesco’s car park at all. And there was someone with her, a bloke, but he was pretty formless. Just a bloke. They drove off. The image went away and Evan waited, but it was the last thing he could concentrate on. He unplugged and replaced the red bulb with a soothing 40-watt light.

“Hello, sweetheart,” Annie said, and put her handbag and car keys on



the kitchen table. "Miss me?"

"Yes." He had a cup of tea ready for her. "Mick came round for a drink."

"Had anything to eat? I got a takeaway. Chicken korma."

"Bit late for me." He had to ask. He just had to. "Give someone a lift tonight, did you?"

He wished he'd been ready for the reaction, but he hadn't really thought he'd seen a real event. It was just a random thought. It was only a casual question. But she froze. And then he could see it in her lovely face, all of it.

"Yes, I dropped the bakery manager off on the way back, that's all," she said. Her lips were pressed into a line. "Why are you asking?"

Evan's gut shivered. The problem was that he didn't know why—because he had seen something? Because she might have confirmed a suspicion he hadn't even had an hour ago? Or because she might have been carrying on with a man who was a *manager*, someone with a real, serious job?

"I thought you were a bit later than usual, that's all," he said.

Lies. Suddenly his new skill—if that was what it was—seemed to have lost a little of its joy.

They didn't discuss the bakery manager next day, or even the day after that. Mick came round as promised on Monday at 6:00 p.m. with a large scale map of the center of town. Evan told him about the vision—well, he didn't have a better word—of the unidentified car park.

"Jesus," said Mick. "That's interesting."

"But I might have had a subconscious suspicion that she was seeing someone. She's a looker. She could get a better bloke."

"And you have the, um, vision on the night she gives him a lift?"

"She said it was just that. A lift."

"I didn't mean to suggest it wasn't."

Was he that upset about it? Yes. He worried that he was still a brickie's laborer at twenty, working in an industry where bad weather put you out of work, and where arthritis or worse made you old at forty. What sort of prospect was he for a woman who wanted a house of her own? At that moment he envied Mick more than he envied the first man on the moon. Mick had a future of possibilities that went a long way beyond finding interesting books in the library. Mick had an education.

That was the most remote view he had ever seen. It was so far away that it seemed further than space.

"Come on." Mick unfolded a large-scale map of the city and Evan

settled himself at the kitchen table with the map spread out before him. He shut his eyes and put his finger in the middle of it. Then he breathed slowly and deliberately. The picture was up on the left again, not at all like looking at TV. It never filled his whole view.

"What can you see?"

"A room, light colored walls, big cupboards and a big window all along one side." He paused. *Whoosh-slap, whoosh-slap, whoosh-slap.* His heartbeat interrupted him. "A white board on the wall with writing on it. Desks. Well, sort of. Rows of tables with metal chairs." He stopped. Annie's potential infidelity interrupted his thoughts. "Nah, that's it. Sorry."

"Want to know what you've just described?"

"What?"

"The lecture theatre in D Block."

So what? He'd worked on sites all over town. Half the buildings in the city seemed to belong to the university, and he'd seen inside so many of them that he was sure they all looked the same. It was just memories that his brain was churning up like a cement mixer. "Lucky guess," Evan said.

"You always doubt yourself. Whatever you see, you explain it away."

"I think I'm being bloody silly."

Mick gave him an impatient look and shook his head. "Come on. Shut your eyes and let's have another go." He obeyed. The map crackled as Mick picked it up and repositioned it, and he felt the draught of its movement on his face.

"Do you ever get the feeling you've done the wrong thing?" Evan asked.

"All the time," said Mick.

"I mean that you've missed out on something."

"Anything in particular?"

"School." He opened his eyes. "Education."

Mick looked at Evan for a long time, and that made him feel uncomfortable, because the blokes on the building site never did that unless they were picking a fight.

"I always got the feeling you weren't a bricklayer at heart," Mick said.

"I'm not even a bricklayer. They've got a real craft. I'm just a brickie's laborer."

Mick shuffled his feet and leaned back in the chair, fiddling with the plastic tie from a six-pack.

"Don't have to stay one, do you?"

"I didn't get my exams," Evan said.

"You still can."

"I'm not going back to classes. Not book stuff, anyway. If I couldn't do it then, I can't do it now."

"That's crap. You can learn to do anything if you want to. What are you afraid of? That your girlfriend and your mates won't know you anymore?"

It was closer to the truth than he wanted to admit. Changing who you were was hard on everyone. He didn't really like the idea of Annie losing weight, even if she did look really good now, just in case she left him. He thought the car park vision was just his worst fears breaking loose in his mind.

"I'm not afraid," he lied. "I'd just feel an idiot sitting in a classroom at my age."

"People learn to program computers in their eighties. Think about it."

After Mick left, he settled on the sofa and watched the football. He turned the sound down. The match was pretty poor and he didn't care much about the Italian league. He wanted to see something interesting, like the volcano that could blow up and wipe out Naples at any time, the one he'd seen on the documentary last week. That'd ruin their game. A hole in the ground that could wipe out a city. It was amazing.

He thought about classes. What would Annie say? How much would it cost them, now they were on one wage most of the time? Even if he did it, how many more exams would he have to take to reach Mick's position, where you had all the possibilities in the world?

Everything seemed so far away right then. It was a long way to see.

"I'm lost," Mick said.

They stopped the car. Evan pulled out the sketch map someone had drawn for them and checked it. Taunton that way, turn right at the junction for Glastonbury. Mick had said a trip to Glastonbury would be a laugh, because everyone there believed in ley lines and dowsing. It was the local industry. He'd even promised Evan a walk up the Tor.

Evan inspected the hand-drawn map. "Looks like we're not at the junction yet," he said. Whoever had drawn it hadn't put in useful things like pubs and road numbers, and he'd never been to Somerset, so it was all guessing. "I suppose we just carry on and look for signs to Taunton."

"Okay. If we see a garage first, I'm getting a proper road atlas." Mick pulled out of the lay-by and they traveled in silence. The throb of the car stereo was soothing even though it was loud.

"Have you done anything about evening classes?" Mick asked.

"Not yet."

"Discussed it with Annie?"

"No."

The music covered the silence between them. He saw a landscape in his mind, just there, up on the left again, for no reason.

"You'll come to a white building with a yew tree in front soon," he said. *Where did that come from?* "Hundred yards on the right, there's a pub with a painted sign with a horse on it and then the turning is on your next right."

"O...kay," Mick said, slowly.

The car drove on and they came to white building with a yew tree in front. A hundred yards on there was a pub with a painted sign showing a gray horse. Mick slowed down and pulled up to stare at it: a couple of cars swerved round them, one honking in fury.

"I don't think we need the atlas," said Mick. He looked a little shaken, all white and quiet. "Very impressive."

"I did it, didn't I?"

"Yes. You did."

And suddenly Evan knew what the Tor would look like, and what he would be able to see from its summit, the whole county spread out around him like a giant map. He could do it. He could do something he had *learned* to do. He could do something the CIA trained really clever people to do, and if he could do that, he could learn to do *anything*. But if it was a fluke, a crazy piece of luck—no, he slapped down the doubt that was already creeping up on him. *No*. He wouldn't let that voice whisper *failure, failure* at him any longer.

He had a future that telly couldn't show him. It was unknown because it was for him to shape, and he would start shaping it in small ways by going back to class.

He thought he might have whooped out loud, but instead he sank into silence. He saved the whoop of joy for the moment he stopped at the top of Glastonbury Tor, out of breath and elated, and turned to see the map-landscape of green and gold and copper exactly as he expected.

Evan knew for sure that the road to the remote country was close—close enough to touch. •



*Once a memory is created there's no real way to destroy it. So they wall it all up, build protective barriers around the memories. The problem is, in your case, they damaged some other equipment in there...*

# Resurrection Radio

Patrick Johanneson

## **The car**

There's one thing, really, only one major thing wrong with Kayla's car. Every time we're on the road—which is most of the time, really—there's the smell of gas in it from somewhere. I'm no mechanic—I don't even know, most of the time, where my driver's license is—but I'm certain that there's something deeply wrong with gasoline vapor finding its way into the cab of the car.

It wouldn't even be so bad if it wasn't for the fact that Kayla smokes when she drives. Constantly. Incessantly.

In my mind's eye I see it perfectly—a black and orange paroxysm of flame, a vaguely car-shaped shadow in the middle, the two of us doomed at the explosion's heart. Sometimes I dream about it. The whole scene reminds me perpetually of my own mortality, and the fact that there probably isn't a lot in the car that isn't flammable—and toxic at that—makes me, if possible, yet more nervous.

I mentioned it to her once. You know what she said? “Relax, Dan-o,” she said, and laughed. “Nothin’ to worry about.”

"Fire," I said. "Ball."

"You worry too much, man," she said, and laughed again. "Really. No fear."

The car would be a classic if she were to restore it. Glossy wax on a custom paint job, the heavy, irregular rumble of the engine modulated and tempered by a complete muffler system (along with God knows how many repairs under the hood), brilliant chrome on all the chromable surfaces and a bunch of gilt plastic trophies on Kayla's shelves. The way it is right now, though, the body's in bad shape, pocked with rust-ringed holes, the windshield's a spiderweb of cracks and chips—when the sun's in her eyes, I don't know how she can see to drive—the engine puts probably half its power into its basso profundo voice, and the most expensive part of it, mornings, is the full tank of gas. By afternoon it's evenly split between the gas and the sound system.

It's a good system. When she bought the car she yanked out the push-button AM-only non-functioning piece of crap radio and had somebody install her a good system, a CD player, subwoofer (usually lost in the sound from under the hood), good speakers in good locations. When she cranks the tunes, they probably hear us coming an extra mile down the road.

## René

On the road beside a lush hillside dotted with damp-dark headstones, the hitcher sat, his olive-drab army-issue duffel bag a makeshift seat. Felt-tip capitals on corrugated cardboard, runny in the rain, said JERSEY PLEASE. Kayla laughed, and I did too, at the curious politesse of the sign.

We pulled over. We always do. The tires crunched on the wet gravel, and the hitcher picked up his duffel and hurried to the car. He was old, especially for a hitch-hiker, probably sixty-five or more. A bald dome of a head, fringed with thin white hair gone slightly yellow. His grin was toothy, though, and his gait was crisp and swift, if slightly stoop-shouldered.

Kayla turned down the stereo while I got out, wrestled with the trunk lid—for a door with a broken lock, it's hard to get it to open—and he tossed the bag into the dark maw with the ease of long practice. Rain plastered my hair to my head; rivulets of water ran down my face. He clambered into the back as I got back into the front. I turned, extended a hand. "Daniel," I said. "This is Kayla."

He shook my hand, once, a solid, firm-gripped pump. "René," he said. "Like Descartes."

Kayla shook her head, smiling, and laid the hammer down.

"Where in Jersey are you headed?" she asked, the highway humming away below us, just barely visible through the cracks in the floorboards.

"Amalthea," he said.

"Is that north or south?"

"North," he said. "By Cavor, in that area."

"All right," Kayla said. To me: "You wanna see if we've got a Jersey map?"

"Sure." I opened the glove box—literally held shut with a drying glob of pink gum which was still fresh enough to give off the faintest whiff of cinnamon—and pulled out the thick wad of papers inside. "Repair manual," I recited, tossing them back in as I named them, "registrations for the last four years, map of Lesser Juniper County, one of Liddleton, placemat from Sticky's, another map of Liddleton, dry-cleaning bill, pocket German phrasebook, map of—aha, Jersey, here we go." I kept the map out, crammed the remaining unanalyzed papers back in and flipped the door up again. Started unfolding the map. Good thing it's a big car, I thought, not for the first time. "What're we on?" The rain was combining with the half-rotten state of the wipers to make it hard for me to see, but Kayla kept the accelerator hard down. A huge rooster tail hung perpetually behind us, in rain.

"Forty-one," Kayla said. "Just coming up on Billabong."

"Who names these places, anyway?"

René spoke up from the back seat. "I worked once for the Geographical Survey," he said. "Quite some time ago. Seems like another lifetime now." He laughed softly, wistfully. "Those days are long over now."

"Ever name anything?" said Kayla.

"Everything worth naming is named already," he said. "Though I once ran across a book of charts that was labelled *An Alternate Nation*. A GS legend, it was. An apocrypha, a book of maps with rivers, mountains, cities, all named for GS patriarchs. Lake Underhill. Gare-le-loup River. Mount Sturban. Ah, Sturban. He was my mentor at the GS for a time." I looked back at him. His gaze was out the misty window, looking at something far more distant than the rolling meadows beyond the blacktop. "Such a crass punster, for such a brilliant man, was Sturban. 'Mount Sturban,' indeed." He chuckled softly, the sound almost lost in the roar of road and engine. "And I—I took up my pencil, and I found an unnamed brook, and I named it for myself. Vanmire Creek. My handwriting was neater, much neater then; my hands didn't shake." He sighed, and by slow degrees his gaze returned from whatever infinity he'd been contemplating.

After a while, Kayla said, "Billabong. There a gas station there?"

The sky was clearing, but at the pumps the smell of gas overrode the odor of fresh rain just stopped. Kayla was pumping regular with a cigarette, mercifully unlit, dangling from her lips. René was walking around, "stretching my legs." He seemed to be walking taller now, the stoop gone from his shoulders. Maybe he'd just been sitting on his duffel bag too long. Or maybe the rain brought on aches that were now freshly absent. Whatever, didn't matter.

I bought a bag of mints and paid with a handful of coins. The clerk gave me a funny look, half dreamy, and swept the silver with one hand into the other. She dumped it into the till without counting it. Trusting, I thought. Or stoned.

When I came back out, Kayla was on her way in to pay for the gas. René was sitting on the hood of the car, his face turned to the sun, eyes closed. His hands were rolling tiny curls of tobacco in a cigarette paper with the ease of decades of practice.

He smiled at me without opening his eyes. "Been a long time," he said, "since I felt sunlight this bright on me." He licked the length of the paper, closed it off, pinched it shut. "Got a light?"

"Yeah." I swung out my gold lighter. I don't smoke, much, but Kayla does, nearly continually. With friends like her, it's damn near a necessity to own a lighter.

"Thanks." He puffed a couple times in silence. "Been a long hard road," he said, "gettin' this far. Thanks for the ride."

"No problem," I said. "It's what we do."

"Yeah," he said. "I s'pose it is."

Kayla came out of the little convenience store, lighting her own cigarette with a paper match. She shook the match but it didn't go out; then she dropped it. I watched with an almost surreal detachment as it fell toward the gas-soaked gravel of the pump area, wondering if this would be it, the time that my luck finally ran out and I became nothing but a rapidly-diverging cloud of messy chunks, thrust outwards and upwards by a greasy black-orange fireball—

The match vanished before it hit the ground. Or seemed to; I'm pretty sure my eyes were playing tricks on me. Maybe, I thought, I was so caught up in the flame that when it snuffed out in the air, I lost track of the falling piece of paper. Maybe. But it sure as hell *seemed* to just—*vanish*.

Weird.

The matchbook was stuck upright in a crack in the upholstery between me and Kayla. The red cover was a standard ad, "Red's Gas, Hwy 41, Billabong's Best Soft Serve Ice Cream." A monochrome image of the



station's highway sign stood beside the white text.

We turned onto 208 and Kayla opened up the throttle. We were barreling for Jersey. I closed my eyes.

I was standing atop a wooden dais supported on the shoulders of a hundred people.

The platform was rough under my bare feet. I was nude. It was warm and getting hotter. Get a lot hotter, I thought, before all this is done. It was a familiar thought, one I had thought before, over and over.

The people under my platform trudged ever onwards, ever downwards. Warmer and warmer still. Hot breezes caressed me, licking away sweat, leaving me no cooler. At least I get to return, I thought. At least I get a ticket back out.

The stink of the place was amazing. The corridor was a wide tunnel bored through rugged rock, the floor uneven with tailings and slick with a film of filthy water. Always this place disgusted me.

At least I get to leave again. Even if it is only to return to this cave.

Jerking awake, the sky gone from twilight to bruise-purple, all but the brightest stars washed away by the orange glow of a city, about ten miles distant.

"Amalthea?" I asked.

"Ah," said Kayla, "you're back. No, that's Turin. Amalthea's about another twenty miles after that." She looked at me. "Bad dream?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't remember it." I must have fallen asleep again, because I woke up next when the back door slammed shut.

I was alone in the car, parked in front of a highway-side restaurant, some nameless truck stop whose biggest sign proclaimed OPEN 24 HRS! BREAKFAST ANY TIME! Kayla was behind the car, helping René with his duffle bag. She slammed the trunk and they shook hands; Kayla shook her head at something René said. Then René shouldered his duffle and headed into the restaurant.

What the hell, I thought, is going on?

René didn't look a day over seventeen.

"Seriously," I said to Kayla, over coffee and well-aged donuts, "he looked like some kid, shaved head, swagger, everything. I don't get it. I just don't get it."

Kayla looked ready to say something, then she pursed her lips and sipped her coffee. Then: "You just woke up. Dreamtime can do weird stuff to your head."

“Yeah,” I said. “Guess so.”

## Ulf

The Devil saw the hundred people below me and he smiled. Always and ever, that smile chilled me to the bone. Even in the rotting sweaty furnace heat of Hell, the smile of the Devil himself made my blood run cold. Every time, every single time.

He held out a taloned hand, offering me something. My chit, my patchwork note of completion. I snatched it away. I tried not to look at it; it never bore looking at. There were, as ever, hairs still stuck in it. Odd symbols writhed across it, tattooed in. Written in blood and signed with the Devil’s name, it was my ticket back to the Real World, the only way to get past the demons that guarded the border.

My pound of flesh.

When I woke up there were exactly two sources of light in the car: the pale green glow of the instrument cluster, and the orange tip of Kayla’s cigarette. We were screaming down N-198, across the open plains, nothing around us but miles and miles of wheat and corn and kine. The occasional farmyard light burned blue or yellow or orange, never white.

Kayla gentled the engine in the middle of UNDERHILL POP 800. She seemed to be looking for something. We drove slowly down the main drag, white-painted stores with black windows like gaps in teeth, their painted wood signs weathered into illegibility. The stereo pounded out White Zombie at filling-shaking decibels.

He was standing across the road from a white clapboard church, the cross-topped steeple almost as tall as the building was long. Behind him, the cemetery gates stood open, apparently around the clock. Small towns.

His thumb was out. We pulled over. Just before we stopped, I said to Kayla, “Who hitchhikes at four a.m.?”

“Who drives at four a.m.?” she answered. “Guess it’s just a part of some big master plan.”

“Yeah.” Sometimes Kayla’s a bit odd. Philosophical. “Must be.”

He got in, young guy, maybe twenty, twenty-five. Black fatigue pants, black boots, a sleeveless black T-shirt that read “KMFDM.” Even in the dark of night he wore a pair of black sunglasses that bulged like a bug’s eyes. His dark hair was short and spiked and he had a dark goatee. “Hey man,” he said, “thanks.”

“I look like a man?” said Kayla.

“Nah, sorry, figure of speech. Appreciate it. Not much traffic, this time of night.”

"Not usually," said Kayla.

"Guess tonight's an unusual night," I said. "Daniel," pointing to myself, "and Kayla."

"Name's Ulf," he said. "Good tunes, by the way."

"Thanks," said Kayla, and hit the gas. I said, "Where to, pardner?"

"Gellufson."

"Don't know that."

"Upstate Groenfeld, near, ah, Groenstadt."

"Okay," said Kayla. "We're headed for Kumiston, in Newbridge county. If I remember correctly, that's just the other side of the state line from Groenstadt. Probably you can hop the rest of it with a trucker or something."

"Sure," he said, "anything's better'n walkin'."

I handed the stitched-together piece of hide to the demon. He squinted at it, then ate it and opened the black iron gateway. My litter folded up and tucked away in a non-linear dimension, I stepped through, bound for the boneyards, the gravesides, ready to collect my next batch of the damned.

With a strangled sound I snapped back awake, the dream—the nightmare—fading down a lightless tunnel into nothingness.

"Bad dream?" Kayla's face was a grim thing, her lips drawn into a tight straight line, her eyes narrow slits, focused hard on the narrow black ribbon of the highway.

"Guess so," I said. "Don't remember."

I turned around. The kid was gone. "We drop him off already?"

Kayla sounded distracted. "Huh? Oh, him, yeah. He's back where he belongs." Behind us, the first hints of dawn light were tickling the blackness at the rim of the world.

A fly was buzzing on the window beside me, a big one. I slapped at it, missed. "Crap," said Kayla, "just open the window, you know? Don't get a big mess all over it."

I just looked at her. Her car was a wreck, literally a ruin on wheels, held together by bubble gum and duct tape in flagrant defiance of the laws of thermodynamics, and she was lecturing me on the cleanliness of her *windows*?

I rolled the window down a crack. If the fly was smart enough to get out, I decided, it would live to fight another day. But if it was still inside when I rolled the window back up, splat, it was dead.

It buzzed out the window as soon as the gap was wide enough for it to

fit. The wind caught it and it was gone.

## Firelight

"Peyote," she said, a small paper bag in her hand. "Go on, take it. Something I have to tell you, and this'll break down the barriers, you know?" The fire flickered across her face, deep blacknesses chasing orange light. Around us, the desert lay flat and chill, the distant stars brilliant.

I took the bag, looked inside: two irregular buttons of some kind of dried plant matter. "Peyote," she said again.

"Where's yours?"

"Already ate 'em," she said. "Hurry up."

By slow degrees the night grew brighter. It looked like aurora, sort of, brilliant sheets of shimmering colors, blue and green and red, but it wasn't just in the sky, it was everywhere; the car was iridescent with it, the desert stones and sand shimmered like oilslicks in midday sunlight.

Midnight, she said, and her voice was a hollow drum, a great basso wave rolling over and around me, midnight and all's well. She giggled. It was musical.

I was—

My arms were—

"I don't" get "it," I said.

It's "almost time," she said. "Wait." Wait "a little" while longer.

The fire was the centre of the auroral glow, the crux and the source of it all. As such it danced and sang, became different things: a horned devil, a dog's head, a naked woman on her knees. A horse. A housefly, grotesquely enlarged.

It's time, she said. Are you seeing it?

It's happening, isn't it, Dan-o? Her mouth was forming the words, but only gibberish sounds were coming out, waves of air pressure that faded and spiked in dull roars and shrieking pitches.

We're breaking through, she said.

But my brain, my brain, my brain was somehow getting the words back, retranslating the nonsense into English, I don't know how. Maybe it was the drug, the mushroom, the cactus, I don't know what the hell she fed me.

■



The fire jumped and steadied.

Wake up, she said. There is no Union of North America. That's just a fiction, something your mind created to make sense of what's happening. The state names you come up with, I don't know where they come from. It's all bizarre, but that's to be expected.

What are—What are you talking about? I said.

Groenfeld. Jersey. Newbridge county. There are no such places. Juniper. Billabong. None of them exist.

How do we get there, then?

We don't.

They were efficient, she said, but they were none too precise. They cleaned your mind up, walled away your Hell trips from your conscious mind. But you still dream about them, Dan. I know you do. The dreamtime breaks down the barriers, lets it all leak back in. I hear you murmuring, I hear you screaming. And they did other damage too.

Nobody lasts very long on the Hell circuit, she said.

What the hell are you talking about? I demanded.

Do you remember the boy, Dan-o? Ulf? Kid in some small town, Eye-blink or something?

Underhill, I said. I don't know how I knew that.

Underhill, yeah, whatever. Do you know why he died?

Died?

Yeah. He was fond of twelve-year-old girls. Used to seduce them, or rape them if necessary, in the cornfields outside of town. One day a father caught him in the act. Broke his legs with a baseball bat, then loaded him into the trunk of his car. Took him to the deep woods west of town and unloaded a ten-shot pump-action twelve-gauge into him. Worked in a spiral, started with the feet and hands and ended with the heart. Kid was dead of shock and blood loss by the time he got to the abdomen, but the father just kept on going. By then it was almost ritual.

Died? I said again.

Yeah, she said. And came back as a fly.

But that can't be right, I said, half to myself.

Kayla said, Oh yes it is.

Dan-o, do you know what you are?

She didn't wait for me to answer.

You're a conduit. You and I, we ferry the souls back from death to their new birthplaces. You, you used to work the Hell circuit, the Christian

Hell, carrying the damned down the wide way. It takes a toll, even on a transnatural human. They can suppress your empathy, but only up to a point. They knew it was time to transfer you when you just wiggled out. So they moved you slantwise to the Buddhist run, and so now we pick up the dead and we transport them to their places of rebirth. Before they gave you to me they fixed up your mind so you wouldn't remember the Hell trips.

Now memory's a funny thing. Once a memory is created there's no real way to destroy it. So what they do is they wall it all up, they build protective barriers around the memories. The problem is, in your case, they damaged some other equipment in there, and so your ability to create memories is impaired.

Then there's the fantasy world you project onto things. You imagine a big ugly pig of a car. You picture our charges as hitch-hikers on the side of the road. You imagine yourself as a young male and me as a young chain-smoking female. None of that is real. You and I are about as old as the planet is, and we really don't spend that much time near or on its surface. We occupy many planes of reality, but none of them intersect with the Union of North America.

But after the Hell trip, man, whatever gets you through the days.

If the boy, that kid Ulf, if he was so evil, I said, then why did we see him? Shouldn't he have gone to Hell?

You'd think so, she said, but it doesn't work like that. There is no one right religion. They're all right. Whatever you believe, for yourself personally, you get. Buddhists get reincarnation and the chance to continually improve. Christians get Heaven or Hell; so do the Hebrews. Atheists go into the ground. We got Ulf because somewhere, somewhere deep in that fucking twisted little mind, there was a seed of Buddhist belief. So he gets the chance to prove himself. Starting as a fly on a dung heap somewhere in England.

Every so "often," she said, as the drug seemed to be wearing off, I get you "stoned and while the drug's" got your mental barriers down, I try to explain "things to you and every time, every fucking" time, it all slips "away when the drug wears off" again. Sometimes "I wonder why" I try.

"Why *do* you" try? I asked.

"I've never come up with an answer that fully satisfies" me yet, she said. Maybe I "crave the challenge. Maybe I love you. Maybe I'm stupid, or crazy. My current working" theory is that it's a combination of all "those, and probably other, as-yet-undetermined factors."

"Do you believe me?"

"I don't know. I really don't know. It all makes sense, and yet—"

"Doesn't matter," she said, "if you believe me or not. It's the truth, it's the gods' truth, and one of these days maybe you'll remember in the morning."

## Mitsu

The fire was dead and the morning was coming up bright and chill. Soon the day's dry heat would wash across the desert, but for now I was shivering.

"How you feeling?" Kayla said.

"Had the weirdest dream," I said.

"Yeah? What about?"

But it was gone. "Don't remember," I said. "Just know it was weird."

She shook her head, exasperated at something. "Get in the car." She rose, shrugged off her tatty pink blanket, stretched. "Long day on the road."

And daylight, now. On the side of the road, her thumb outstretched, a young girl with bright red sunglasses and hair cut in a dark bob, just brushing her cheekbones. Behind her, a wrought-iron arch with Cimetière Gare-Lf-Loup Cemetery in rusting iron capitals. All the other cars ignoring her, streaming past, an arterial flow of metal and glass, plastic and volatiles. We pull over to the side, gravel crunching, decelerating gently, coming to a stop with our bumper inches from her skirt-clad knees. She doesn't flinch.

She clambers into the back, sets her small plastic backpack on the seat beside her.

"Where to, hon?" says Kayla.

"Garnton," says the young woman. Her eyes, behind the crimson lenses, are narrow, Japanese.

"Sure," says Kayla. "This here's Dan, I'm Kayla."

"Mitsu," says the girl. "I'm lucky you were going my way."

"We always are," says Kayla. She lays the hammer down, and we spray gravel as we launch back into the traffic.

"Garnton," I say. "That's up near Vanmire Creek, right?"

"Yes," says the girl. "Just south of Mount Sturban."

The open road. Forever. •

# Ribbons. Lighting.

Joanne Merriam

SHE SAW IT COMING FROM THE DOME: THE TRAIN LIKE A WIDE, metallic bolt of lightning, and the people on the bridge. If they started running right away, that second, they just might make it. She shouted at them, the thick metal and glass around her a drum for her voice to echo in.

Their suits were like little universes: no sound from outside. On Earth, they'd have heard the train, she thought. Their backs stubbornly faced the danger, and then were swallowed up by it.

A woman entered the room and said, hello, but she ignored her, tears coursing down her face. "Oh, look!" the woman said. "Isn't that beautiful? I wonder what it is." The fabric of their suits had caught in the wheels, and, ripped and fluttering in the train's wake, spun there, reflecting both suns in searing flashes. •



*A selection of work by our cover artist,  
Martin Springett*



*A Telling of Stars*

Gallery feature:

# **Fantasy: the connecting link**

Martin Springett

## ***A Telling of Stars***

This is the first adult fantasy cover I have done in some years, as I have been concentrating on illustrating kids' books. I met the author Caitlin Sweet through Guy Kay, and she gave me her manuscript to read. As a younger reader she loved the covers I created for *Fionavar*, so it was pleasing for both of us that Penguin Books agreed to let me illustrate the cover for her first novel. The story resonated with me immediately and I came up with the cover concept very quickly. Caitlin was keen on seeing Jaele, the main character in the novel, on her journey. I was visually inspired as there are some beautiful and exotic places along the way. A joy to do. The medium used was acrylic paint on hot press watercolor paper.

## Farmer Giles and Chrysophylax.

This image is from "Farmer Giles of Ham," a short story by J. R. R. Tolkien. I was approached by Harper Collins in the UK to illustrate the story in the manner of a picture book. I came up with a complete design scheme for the story, sketches and layouts, and this one finished piece. Alas, Christopher Tolkien pulled the plug on the project and it was never published. Inspiration was at a high level here, it would have been a dream project. One day perhaps. Created using acrylic and watercolor.



*Farmer Giles and Chrysophylax*



*Bright Weaving CD Cover*

### **Bright Weaving CD Cover**

This year is the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Guy Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry*. I had wanted to record all the instrumental pieces I had written inspired by Guy's books, and put them all on one CD. This seems like the right time. The cover is a "digitized" version of the image I created for *The Wandering Fire*, plus a little Celtic knotwork. I have used other visual elements from *Fionavar* to make it an enticing package.

The CD is available at [www.martinspringett.com](http://www.martinspringett.com), click on music and "Bright Weaving" for ordering info. Hear sound clips and read a rave review. Also available at White Dwarf Books Vancouver, Bakka Phoenix Books Toronto and Munros Books Victoria B C.

### **Bright Weaving Insert**

This image of "The Battle Foretold" from *The Summer Tree* is printed on the inside cover insert of *Bright Weaving*. The battle between the wolf lord Galadan and Cavell is one of my favorite scenes. This was rendered in black line, scanned and colored on the computer.



*Bright Weaving inset*



*Galadan*



*Ceinwen*

The cover image, "Galadan," is from Guy Gavriel Kay's *The Summer Tree* from *The Fionavar Tapestry*, and depicts Galadan and Jeniffer. The back cover illustration, "Ceinwen," is also from the same book, showing Ceinwen, Goddess of the Hunt, and Dave Martynuik.



***The Legends of Arthur, CD cover for Heather Dale.***

This is a cover for an album of songs inspired by the Arthurian Legend, from singer songwriter Heather Dale. Heather and I also hope to do a book based on these tales.



*The Legends of Arthur CD Cover*

***Dance of the Stones*, Book cover for the novel by Andrea Spalding.**

The cover for a Y A novel set in Avebury, England. This character is Ava, half-woman, half-hawk. I loved the setting of this story. These ancient places in England are awe inspiring, and dealing with human activity at such vast removals of time is always a little daunting. The original time travel experience! •



*Dance of the Stones* book cover

*You know that thing, when you die,  
your whole life flashes in front of  
your eyes? In an instant? That's about  
how fast we're moving through time.  
We'll be old and grey before this guy  
discovers you siphoned his tea...*

# Jumpstart Heart

Michael Brockington

IT WAS A GREY MEDIOCRITY OF A DAY. BUREAUCRATIC CLOUDS overhead permitted only a dull, predictable light, not changing from sunrise to sunset. It was day, quite simply, when nothing unusual could happen. A day best reserved for standing in line at banks, or circling the city in search of parking.

Jeremy glanced at the weather forecast in the *Sun*. A ridge of high blood pressure approaching from the east. Scattered episodes of boredom, with sixty percent chance of frustration.

On the facing page all of the horoscopes were blank.

The coffee can in the fridge was empty as a Teamster's pension fund.

It's worse than I thought, he thought.

Jeremy heads down the street to the Ennui Bar & Grill. Wednesday morning regulars gather in an illicit haze of first-hand smoke. Dexter occupies a window booth, trying to finish a side of fries before they congeal.

"What's happening?" Jeremy says, sliding into the booth.

"Nothing," says Dexter. "Earthquake in Tokyo. Shelling in the suburbs of Jerusalem. My arteries," he says, "I can feel them hardening as we speak. One more slice of bacon I'll seize up like the Wood Tinman, the Tin Woodman, the fuck it is." He pokes at Jeremy with a french-fry. "Try the Breakfast Special," he suggests. "Four-fifty, all you can stomach."

A waitress moves toward them, slow as a figure in a dream sequence.

"I need serious coffee," Jeremy says. "Maybe a coffee enema."

"You're a sick man. Have a french fry instead. It'll stimulate your immune system."

"Just the usual," Jeremy tells the waitress.

"That's our specialty," she says, laughing as she drifts away. Hot grease scars gleam white over her hands and forearms.

"Thought I was going deaf," Dexter says. "You believe it, my doctor tells me I got wax build-up in my ears. 'Clean your earholes,' he says. Yelling at me! I already got a mother; so I need to hear this from a professional?"

Jeremy sighs. "You ever have a day when you know nothing is going to happen?" he says quietly. "Doesn't matter what? You won't get run over by a bus or fall in love or find twenty bucks on the street. No way. You've used up all your luck, good and bad—worn the spots right off the dice. The world is only going to ignore you."

"Stop mumbling," Dexter says. He is briskly rotating paper napkins in both ears.

"Day like today, I couldn't even commit suicide."

"Try the Breakfast Special."

"Tell me this. What on earth is so special about the Breakfast Special? Eggs, bacon, coffee, toast—the same damn thing every day. The 'special' is the usual, which is just what I ordered."

Jeremy dribbles a handful of water from Dexter's drinking glass to rub on his face. "Nothing out of the ordinary can happen in this cafe," he continues. "Every little thing is predictable as the order of letters in the alphabet."

"Think so?" Dexter says. "Check out Big Charlie over there. Had his pacemaker repossessed yesterday. His doctor told him it was a gallstone operation, when he woke up they were shoving paper in his face, 'failure to meet your financial obligations,' the whole legal run-around. Why don't you explain to him how nothing can happen? Charlie's got a new hole in his chest and a syncopated heartbeat. He's over there chain-smoking and stuffing down the steak-and-kidney pie, figuring his heart is gonna pop like a boil any minute and he'll never have to pay the check."



Dexter leans forward, lowering his voice. "We got a little pool going; I've got twenty down for 2:30. The man'll shuffle off by mid-afternoon."

"Not today," Jeremy says.

"You're a depressing bastard, you know that?"

"Myrna used to say."

"Anyway, I got the angles covered. Borrowed the twenty bucks off Big Charlie." Dexter chuckles. "So even if he dies wrong, I never have to pay it back. I can't lose!"

"Doesn't improve your chances of winning," Jeremy says.

"Well, yeah, but I'm sure to break even."

"So what you're saying," Jeremy says, "is that nothing happens?"

Dexter gives him a look. "You ever wonder why you got no friends?"

Jeremy allows himself a tight smile of triumph. "I should've settled in the suburbs," he says. "I could've exploited my talent for commuting. Plus out there, you don't expect anything to surprise you."

"The occasional mortar round, maybe a drive-by shooting, but yeah, nothing too heavy. It's those Block-Watch fascists you gotta look out for. Spying and prying, making sure you keep your lawn cut. I ever tell you what happened to my brother, out there in the kingdom of the swimming pools?"

"Not another story about your family," Jeremy complains.

"The citizens next door think they recognize him from some episode of *America's Most Wanted*. Leaving up his Christmas lights, maybe, or failing to neuter his pets—they know he's guilty of *something*. So he's out weeding his begonias, looks up, he's surrounded. It's the Block-Watch, all his friendly neighbors armed with weed eaters and barbecue forks, and they're out for blood.

"He runs inside, locks himself in the bedroom. He's gonna phone the cops, right? But instead of calling 911 he dials 411. The last words he hears are 'For what city, sir?' before the Home Improvement Squad comes through the door with a Black & Decker."

Dexter pushes aside his plate to lean his elbows on the table. "It was an ugly scene when the police finally showed. They'd strung him up upside down on the patio, like Mussolini after the war."

Jeremy notices his waitress over by the grill, carrying his breakfast. She moves at an almost imperceptible rate, no faster than the minute-hand of a clock. "You never had a brother," Jeremy points out, studying the woman's performance. "He was stillborn, you told me once. That doesn't count."

"Brother, whatever," Dexter says, "I'm making a point here. Don't pick at the details, listen to what I'm telling you. You're in a very dangerous

state of mind, Jerm. When you think nothing can possibly happen you become a magnet for disaster. I'm risking my life just sitting here in the same booth with you. My scrotum is knotted with fear, that's all. An attitude like yours, this whole cafe could be obliterated by a falling satellite. Lift the lid off that sugar-bowl, a colony of killer bees might just come swarming out."

"Don't try to cheer me up," Jeremy says. "It's no use. The whole world today is like some stunning gorgeous woman walking down the street. There's no possibility of contact. Even looking hurts, like staring into the sun.

"Can't you see how everything is grinding down, winding down—" Jeremy flicks his Timex with a forefinger. "My watch wasn't working this morning, but I put it on anyway. I'm not even human any more; I'm a habit machine. Isn't this how they always tell the time of death in crummy murder mysteries—broken watches?" He holds the watch to his ear. "Not a tick. Not a tock!"

"Earwax," Dexter murmurs.

Jeremy glares at him. "Look at my waitress!" He points to the back of the cafe. The woman is part-way through lifting a foot from the floor, with the exquisite lethargy of a Tai Chi master. "Even breakfast is impossible. It won't arrive before nightfall."

"This is what they advertise," Dexter says. "The all-day breakfast." He starts assembling a cigarette from tobacco fragments salvaged from butts left in their ashtray. "Let me tell you a story about my kid sister," he says.

Jeremy winces. "You don't realize how foolish that would be. Right now, the only thing I can think about is coffee." He breathes slowly, deeply. "I have a caffeine deficiency, it's a medical condition."

"Sounds like a serious habit," Dexter says.

"I'm trying to tell you."

"I thought they had a group for that."

"The 12-step shuffle? I attended Caffeine Anonymous. It didn't help. Nine months of hanging around in church basements, drinking cheap whiskey and wishing we could have a cup of coffee." Jeremy massages his scalp.

"You'll like this story then," Dexter says, relentless. "My sister was a junkie. Adrenaline addict, wild kid—she wound up same as you, by a different route. Too many thrills, so she got the feeling nothing could touch her. Couldn't feel the rush anymore.

"She took to faking cardiac arrest, scamming injections, 40 cc's of adrenaline, straight to the heart. Move on to the next town before the paramedics got wise."

Desperate, Jeremy stretches over the back of his seat into the next booth and snatches a cup of tea from the table. The man in the booth is frozen like a photograph, still reaching for his missing tea. He has a crumpled face that looks like someone forgot to iron it, a look of perpetual disappointment.

Jeremy gulps the tea. It's yellow, the colour of plasma, and far too sweet. "Why are you telling me this?" he mutters. "Are you on drugs?"

"Diazepam, Imovaine, seven different kinds of tranquilizers. I'm an east-coast animal, Jerm, I can't adjust to this laid-back lifestyle without chemical assistance. S'why they call me Dex. My doctor, Dr. Earwax, he won't prescribe shit. I have to go to a bent veterinarian. That's why I keep so many cats, one of them is always sick with something. They goddamn hate each other. All I do is put them in a room together. Some bloody fur and I score enough to slow me down for a month."

"But I'm the one with the habit?" Jeremy licks the inside of the teacup. "And what, just what *exactly* is the point?"

"Of...?"

"Your sister!"

"The point, right! The point is... One day Sis drops by the supermarket to pick up a can of Neet. She's gonna do her legs, Okay? She goes into the bedroom of some crap motel, and a few minutes later there's this horrible frenzied screaming. Her latest love, her sap-du-jour, he comes running in. He hears this sizzling noise, the bed is hidden in a cloud of greasy smoke, the smoke detectors start wailing.

"He knows exactly what to do. He drops to his knees and crawls for the door. When he comes back later there's nothing left but a charred afghan and a handful of gold fillings scattered on the pillow. Weird thing is, the pillow is unharmed. According to the label it's made of asbestos."

Jeremy fidgets with a laminated menu. "So that's the point? The insurance company makes them do that, in case you fall asleep with a cigarette in your mouth."

"All I'm trying to say is my baby sister was a menace to society. She was ripe for spontaneous combustion. The guy was lucky he didn't get asphyxiated. As it was he lost his wallet in the fire and had to pay off the motel bill with her fillings. And you're turning into exactly that kind of menace, Jerm; you're ground zero. Nature has no tolerance for neutral observers."

"Have you looked at this menu?" Jeremy says, ignoring him. "Rice pudding and porridge. Spinach salad. God help us, tofu and tapioca. Instant decaf! Who castrated this menu?" Jeremy puts it back behind the napkin dispenser. "And where are the salt and pepper shakers? Look at

this—low-calorie sweetener instead of sugar.”

“Listen to me,” Dexter grabs away the packet of NutraSweet. “I think I understand what’s happening.”

“What isn’t happening, you mean.”

“Shut up with that. Quick eschatology lesson. This whole she-bang starts with a Big Bang and winds up with the Big Whimper. That’s how the world ends, not with missiles or meteors. We all bore ourselves to death. Everything becomes indistinguishable. It’s called the Second Law of Thermodynamics, and it works on the social level same as everywhere else. But today is not the day, Jeremy. I’m going to prove you wrong. We’re going to get up, go out and do some thing, any damn thing. We are going to prove you’re still alive.”

Dexter slides out of the booth and lights his scavenged cigarette, tossing the match over his left shoulder, for luck. It falls only a short distance before stopping, suspended three feet above the scuffed linoleum.

“Let’s go,” he says. “We’re gonna get Big Charlie’s heart back.”

“We can’t do that,” Jeremy says. “How are we going to do that?”

“I know his doctor,” Dexter says. “The schmutz. Worries about his community standing. Kind of image, not only his shit doesn’t stink, he thinks it smells like Calvin Klein *Obsession*. The guy squirts perfume up his ass. We threaten to take it to the media and he’ll fold up like an ironing board.”

Jeremy gets up and replaces the empty tea-cup on the table behind him. He stares, fascinated, at the unblinking eyes of the crumpled man. A slight quiver of the eyelashes is visible, nothing more.

“What’s wrong with them?” he asks. “It’s like they’re training to be bank tellers. Why are they moving so slowly?”

“It isn’t them,” Dexter says, behind him. “It’s us. You, actually. We’ve been speeding up. They probably can’t even see us as a blur now. You know that thing, when you die, your whole life flashes in front of your eyes? In an instant? That’s about how fast we’re moving through time. We’ll be old and grey before this guy discovers you siphoned his tea.”

“I’ve been grey all my life,” Jeremy says. “Prematurely mature, Myrna used to say. That doesn’t mean I’m dying.”

Dexter grabs him by the arm and pulls him toward the door. “We need to prove our relevance to the universe *now*,” Dexter says, “before we start going backwards.” The door chimes ring them onto the sidewalk, in tones deep and dismal as cathedral bells.

“You’re a crazy dope fiend with fucking wax in your ears,” Jeremy says, pulling away. “Crazier than me, anyway.”

“Look around you!”



The traffic light outside the cafe is green, but the cars are motionless. Pedestrians are suspended in mid-bustle. A man is trapped in the process of spitting. Jeremy examines the tiny crystal ellipsoids of saliva, hanging in the air.

"This place looks like a cheap twenty-first century theme park," Dexter says. "Cheesy life-size dioramas with no moving parts." He flicks a glob of spittle with one finger, sending it zinging off a parked automobile. "It's like this: we keep speeding up until everything else has stopped moving entirely. We hit the singularity, and on the other side things are moving backward in time, we're going so fast. By that point it's too late; all you can do is rewind through your life until you're unborn."

"But that's grotesque," Jeremy says. "You're saying I have to relive every mistake? Every boring meeting and bus ride?"

"Backwards. It's called the Theory of Oscillating Karma."

"Mary-Louise Fishwhacker!" Jeremy exclaims, hitting his forehead with the heel of his hand.

"Flashes in front of your eyes, that's the deal. Picking up speed as it goes, like watching your life on a string of billboards, seeing them out the window of the subway as you pull out of the station. It's very elegant. Your afterlife is no different than your life before."

"I feel ill," Jeremy says. "I hate going backwards. If I face the wrong direction on the subway I throw up."

"Anything you regurgitate now you're gonna re-regurgitate later. Unless we get a move on. Here's the thing, see: if you store up enough karmic mass you can break the oscillatory cycle. Imagine you're a little baby fetus with a sort of elastic psychic umbilical. The cord stretches as you age until finally it can't stretch any farther. If you're heavy enough the cord just snaps and you keep on going. Otherwise, the cord contracts and you go wanging back into the womb. Karmic featherweights are nebishes, people who haven't left any graffiti on the world."

As Dexter pulls him down the sidewalk, Jeremy turns to look back at the cafe. Orange neon glows behind the dirty windows: Ennui Bar and Grill. Dusty figures behind glass, a museum showcase.

"The name's wrong," Jeremy notices. "How many years have we been eating there? It's supposed to be the On-Wei, Chinese-Canadian Cuisine."

"They renovated," Dexter says. "Welcome to the zeroes. Innovation is out, renovation is in. Nobody comes up with new products any more, just better packaging. Boxes recycled from ninety-percent post-consumer unbleached Kotex, full of the same old stuff."

"Everything's neo or retro: nobody cares about the future. We recycled

the 50s, had a 60s revival, unearthed the 70s, and now the 80s are back from the grave. We're running out of nostalgia decades, my friend. Pretty soon we'll be all misty-eyed about the way the future used to be. Getting drunk and singing the theme song from *The Jetsons*."

"Sounds like your oscillating karma."

"Exactly! The second coming signals the apocalypse—why? It's the *same event* as the first incarnation, Jesus in reruns. It proves we're running backwards through time, heading for the unmaking of the world. I got a pamphlet off this guy down Fourth Avenue, lays the whole thing out.

"Society is a giant time machine. We're retreating into the future, like a paranoid so busy checking behind himself he never looks ahead. Where's our great scientific break-throughs? Where are today's men of tomorrow? We got more scientists alive today than all of history put together, and you know what they're doing? They're all watching TV! We got thalidomide kids, roll back human evolution two million years. Technology is turning us back into fish, for christsake."

"What's so bad about that?" Jeremy says. "Fish have an easy life. Spawn and die. No worries, no memories. I could have been a fish, Dexter. Myrna used to tell me."

"Don't get started on Myrna. We're nearly there."

"A cold fish, she used to call me. Also a chowderhead. She didn't believe I was a vertebrate at all."

"Myrna could boil the flavour out of garlic."

"My little jellyfish, she used to call me. It was a pet name, just a little joke, between the two of us."

"Myrna was an angel of negation. She was an airheart, the way some people are airheads."

"One night at a party I overheard her calling another man a jellyfish. 'What's this?' I cried. 'I thought I was your jellyfish!' Two weeks later she moves out with the guy."

"Maybe it wasn't thalidomide," Dexter says, "but let me tell you, Myrna was some atavistic by-product of industrial poisoning. She was a shark, Jerm, she had to keep moving or drown. And I'll tell you something else. The shark hasn't changed in the last million years. It's an evolutionary dead-end, a perfect eating machine. She chewed up your heart like a wad of bubblegum. Angina Dentata—that's what we'll put on the death certificate."

"It was me." Jeremy leans against a drugstore window, staring at the paralyzed pedestrians surrounding them. "Isn't it obvious? My jealousy poisoned our marriage. That woman had a heart of gold."

"Get out," Dexter says. "Myrna had a heart of gold, she'd slice it out

of herself with a razor blade and trot it down to the pawnbroker. And you know what? Next day she'd be walking around healthy as a pit-bull. There's some people, you gotta realize, their heart just ain't a vital organ."

Jeremy slumps onto the sidewalk. "At least she cared. She loved me enough to tell me what a waste of space I was. I mattered that little bit."

"Of course you mattered, you were edible."

"When she left, I think that's when I started to die. I didn't really exist anymore, anywhere except my own mind."

"Pull yourself together," Dexter says, shaking him. "The doc's office is right in the next block."

"Look at all these people on the street. They can't see me; I don't know them. Myrna left, my mother died, I lost my job. You reach a point, there's nobody left who you matter to. And then you start to fade, fray away at the edges. You're afraid to take off your clothes at night in case they're the only thing holding you together. Buttons, zippers, laces, a protective shell in the shape of a human being that keeps you from blowing away, like smoke. Clothes make the man. If I wear a necktie, it must be true I have a neck. This is the tale of a hat that thought it was a head."

"I understand you're a little depressed right now, dying and all, but you know something?" Dexter says. "You need to have more fun."

"More fun? Try morphine. What I need to have is less pain."

"I got a better idea," Dexter says. "Don't move. Back in a jiffy." Dexter rushes into the drugstore.

Jeremy studies the sidewalk. *J.C. and M.M., together forever* is inscribed in the cement, like an eleventh commandment. He traces the grooves with a finger. Divine graffiti, he thinks, why not? In the far corner the slab is stamped with the date when it was poured: 1938.

"Eat the bunny." Dexter is back, scattering cellophane. He kneels, forcing a chocolate Easter bunny into Jeremy's hands. "You're dangerously low on endorphins."

"You're littering," Jeremy says. "And I bet you didn't pay for this, either."

"Thank you, Mr. Superego. Just eat the damn bunny."

Jeremy bites off an ear.

"Easter is just around the corner," Dexter says. "Chocolate eggs are symbols of resurrection. It's a Eucharist, the transubstantiation of sugar into spirit. Placebo communion with the God of Love. Can you feel the chemical rush? Endorphins are the chemistry of joy; chocolate is love made manifest. Eat the bunny."

"I don't want to be in love," Jeremy complains. But he takes another

bite.

Dexter pulls him to his feet. "Don't worry, it's not the real thing. It's a substitute, with fewer side effects. Like methadone, or NutraSweet. Have an egg."

Jeremy bites into the chocolate egg. His cavities produce a spasm of pain, and he spits it out.

"This way." Dexter pushes him towards a staircase opening onto the street.

Faded signs line the stairwell. *Easy Terms! No money down!* The wooden stairs sag in the centre, eroded by generations of feet. *90 days to pay!* At the top they go through a door with a frosted glass window bearing the inscription *Herman Kwok, D.D.*

"That's got to be a joke—Doc Kwok?" Jeremy stops in the waiting room, suddenly panicked. "Wait a second. What is this guy, a dentist?"

"Doctor of Divinity," Dexter says. "Defrocked. How come he's so cheap."

One rug, green, thin as a communion wafer. Fluorescent lights, half of them dark. A huge metal desk in the corner, heavy as sin and twice as ugly. It looks far more solid than the building itself. This is a fixture, in the perfect sense of the word, impossible to move. The desk is a fixed asset; the desk is collateral.

Jeremy glances at the receptionist behind the desk and quickly looks away. "You see that?" He closes his eyes. "One look, just one look!" He sighs. "It makes my teeth hurt."

"What's the problem?"

"She's beautiful," Jeremy protests. And in her own perverse, frozen way, she is, with a wide mouth and huge tinted glasses and cotton-candy hair whipped up high above her head. Jeremy forces himself to walk over to the desk, makes himself lean over with his tie dangling into the typewriter keys, and kisses her beautiful mouth. And it is soft, yes, and warm, yes, and sweet with the taste of bubblegum, but of course there is no response. It reminds him a great deal of Myrna.

"What are you doing?" Dexter says, behind him. "You got no time for that."

Jeremy joins him at the door to Dr. Kwok's office. "I wanted something to look forward to when I start going backwards."

"Lemme give you some advice. You got the wrong fairy tale. One, you're no Prince Charming; two, she ain't Sleeping Beauty. This is more a Wizard of Oz scenario. We need a heart for Big Charlie, some new brain chemistry for me, and for you I don't know. What do you need?"

"Only thing I wanted today was a cup of coffee."

"Step number three, Jerm. Put your faith in a higher power." Dexter opens the door. They exit the outer office and enter the inner.

It's dimmer here, and Jeremy can barely make out a body, Dr. Kwok, lying on an old leather couch. Kwok is shrunken, shriveled like something found in the back of the fridge. His skin is the colour of leather, blending with the furniture. Jesus, is he old, nineteen hundred and ninety-nine years old at least, Jeremy thinks. "Count the wrinkles in his face," he whispers to Dexter. "That's what my aunt used to say, if you want to know how old someone is."

Kwok's eyes fly open. "Wrinkle-counting!" he snorts. "I can grow 'em faster than you can count 'em." He jumps off the couch and walks around behind his desk.

"He's moving," Dexter manages at last. "I mean he's alive. I mean, we're alive!"

"Are you a doctor?" Kwok says. "No? Then leave the diagnosis to a professional. As it happens, I often self-medicate, borderline-lethal doses of amphetamine. A near-death experience stretches out the subjective experience of time, as I'm sure you've noticed. I never find enough hours in the day to get through my paperwork." His desk, Jeremy notes, is hidden in stacks of files, reports, loose piles of paper. Carbon paper spreads over the floor like soot.

"We seem to be operating at much the same rate, but don't worry, I think we can assume you're dead, gentlemen. My question is, do you have an appointment?"

"Yeah," Dexter says. "Operating table for two, by the window. We made a reservation. Check with your receptionist."

Kwok smiles. "So, what do you think you're dying of?"

"I'm not," Dexter says. "I'm from Toronto. All's I need is some tranquilizers to slow me down. My friend's the one needs medical attention."

Kwok moves slowly around the desk, careful not to stir up a draft. He fits a stethoscope to his ears. "Remove your shirt."

Reluctantly, Jeremy complies. Unbuttoning the shirt, he worries there may be nothing underneath. No flesh, no bone, just vacant space.

"Interesting," Kwok says, sliding the disk of metal over Jeremy's chest. "Mm-hmm." Even his earlobes are wrinkled. "How long have you had this problem?"

"What problem?"

"Absent heartbeat."

Jeremy stares at Kwok. "That's great," he says. "That's just what I need—a stand-up medic."

"You want a second opinion?" Kwok tosses the stethoscope to Jeremy.



"Check it yourself. You notice?" he says, talking to Dexter now, "he didn't flinch at all coming in contact with the metal. Falling body temperature." He whistles a descending tone, like a dropping bomb.

Jeremy dons the stethoscope, touches the disk to his chest. Emptiness, the sound of a seashell. Frantically, he moves the stethoscope around, searching for a rhythm. He hears only static and, from between the lower ribs on his left side, the faint distorted music of a drunken mariachi band.

Jeremy hands the instrument back to Kwok. "Wax," he suggests, "I've got wax in my ears."

"You could have a candle in each ear," Kwok says. "Wax is not your problem. Your heart is the problem. You're in denial, of course, but don't delude yourself. This distortion of your time-sense is a typical symptom. What you need is a new ticker." Kwok crosses to a wall cabinet beside his desk and fiddles with the lock. "I can put you on a hospital waiting list; maybe seventeen weeks—"

"Seventeen weeks!" Dexter snaps. "Won't the rigor mortis interfere with the surgery?"

"—or we can conduct a private arrangement." Kwok opens the cupboard. Shelf upon shelf of gleaming organs in glass jars: fluffy pink lungs, glistening kidneys, ruffled colons. An entire shelf is cluttered with bottled hearts. They look more like overgrown oysters than valentines.

"Quite a selection," Kwok says, "with little wear and tear. Mostly harvested from your younger individuals, deaths by misadventure. Gunshot wounds, traffic accidents, drowning." His gestures remind Jeremy of a game-show model, stroking products.

"If you prefer something that hasn't been pre-owned, I have one of these little beauties in stock: the Jarvik-8. Artificial of course, but beautifully engineered and guaranteed unbreakable. It's an investment really, the sort of thing you can pass on to your children. If you're self-employed you can claim depreciation on your taxes.

"No?" Kwok flashes Jeremy a glance over his spectacles. "I can see you'd prefer something more organic. This may be the very thing." He lifts a slightly larger jar down and places it on his desk. "You're aware of baboon organ transplants into humans? Well, this is the heart of a great sea turtle. Your sea turtle reaches several hundred pounds, and lives up to two centuries."

"Is a turtle a mammal or a fish?" Jeremy says.

"Reptile, I believe. The benefit of radical xenotransplants is there's a much lower probability of rejection. With a human heart the chances are high that your immune system would destroy it. Like a parasite. That's

the usual problem: another person's heart is too foreign and too familiar, all at once."

"This wouldn't be covered by medical?"

"It's a private arrangement, as I said," Kwok says. "You'll have to sign an agreement, here, here, here..." He makes three small crosses on a sheet of paper extracted from the chaos of his desk. "And all it's going to cost... is your immortal soul!"

Kwok smiles, wrinkles multiplying like a fractal landscape. "Just my little joke. Nothing down, three hundred a week for ten weeks."

"Sounds reasonable," Jeremy admits.

"Cheaper than a funeral," Kwok says.

"Slow down a second," Dexter breaks in. He snatches the pen away from Jeremy. "What about Big Charlie?"

"Gimme the pen," Jeremy says.

"Big Charlie McCorquodale," Dexter yells, dodging behind the couch. "Word on the street is you repossessed the man's pacemaker. I'm not sure we want to do business with someone would do a thing like that."

"What are you saying, we? I'm the one with the absent heartbeat." Jeremy circles around the desk. "Give me the pen, Dex. Unless you want to wind up in fourteen different glass bottles."

"Gentlemen!" Kwok pulls another pen from his vest pocket and offers it to Jeremy. "Mr. McCorquodale was in last week, yes," he says to Dexter. But it had nothing to do with his heart. He wanted a stomach transplant. I can show you the file."

"He needed a new gut?" Dexter says.

"Not really. He wanted a second one. He'd been reading about cows, how they have four stomachs, and thought he was missing out. It cost a thousand cash, but he calculated it'll pay for itself in six months, from smorgasbords alone. I'm telling you this in strictest confidence, of course."

"Oh, of course," Dexter says uneasily.

"You can keep the pen, by the way. They're a promotional item."

Kwok examines the contract, then drops it onto the chaos of his desk. "If you'll just lie down I'll fix you up."

"On the couch?"

"That would be the most comfortable," Kwok says. "Zip, zip, zip. Everything's done as an outpatient these days."

Jeremy lowers himself onto the couch, squinting into the incandescent light-bulb overhead. He feels a sting in his neck like a mosquito and tries to swat at it, but his hands won't move.

"I'm giving you a spinal block," Kwok says. "I hate to knock you out

completely. It's a remarkable experience."

"But I can't see anything," Jeremy complains. "I can't move."

"I'll give you a play-by-play. Perhaps your friend can hold a mirror. Tell me, can you feel this?"

"What?"

"Chest incision, 8 inches."

"Jesus! That must hurt. Dexter, get me a mirror willya?"

"I just had breakfast," Dexter says. "Besides, I'm looking over this contract."

"Next, we crack open the sternum."

"I feel something, jarring my spine, up in my neck a vibration."

"What's this bit, where he's signed, about you at no time having represented yourself as a surgeon?"

"Technicalities," Kwok says. "The college of physicians has it in for me. They feel my work is malpractice by definition, even if the operation is a perfect success. Next we clamp the breastbone apart. Tell me if you feel any discomfort."

"I feel great," Jeremy says, "I can't remember the last time I felt so relaxed."

"This is the real mystery," Kwok says. "When you're a child, you think the big secret is sex—we sever the membrane protecting your internal organs—and when you get a little older you think psychology is the enigma. All those obscure things going on inside other people's heads."

"There is a foreclosure clause," Dexter says, "I knew there would be. You can send a repo man over to rip his heart out."

"You walk around, you eat, you excrete. Matter passes through your system, but you never see the inside of your own body. It's terra incognita. In here, your internal organs—these are your truly private parts. Not the genitals. In fact, your testicles are your only external organs."

"Goddammit Dexter, you should be videotaping this!"

"You read in the paper about all these horrible crimes, multiple murderers slicing up their victims, and in their own simple-minded way I think this is what they're searching for. They want, they need to touch the mystery. The heart."

"Jesus," Dexter whispers, "that's a heart?"

"Not very pretty, is it? Normally, we'd stop it with a potassium bath, but in this case there's no need."

Jeremy feels no pain, just a tugging motion conducted to his neck, where the nerves are still firing. "Show it to me," he says. "At least let me see it."

"A moment," Kwok says. Jeremy can hear the click and snip of surgical

scissors, musical clinks as instruments are lifted or dropped from an unseen tray.

"Anatomy was a mystery until Renaissance artists started digging up bodies and dissecting them. At risk of being burned as witches. Artists, surgeons, serial-killers: you can't really file them in separate categories. Jack the Ripper was all three." Kwok makes a small noise of satisfaction.

A stainless-steel tray is thrust into Jeremy's line of sight, tilted so he can see inside.

"It's so small," he says at last. The ugly knot of gristle is about the size of a tangerine orange, ridged with scar tissue.

"Note the extensive lesions," Kwok says. "Really it's quite astonishing that it could function at all."

"Myrna," Jeremy says.

"I'm sorry?"

"Myrna! That toxic bitch. Read the pattern of scars," Jeremy says, "it spells out her name." He bangs his head against the couch, sending up puffs of dust. "I let her inside me and she carved out her name like graffiti on a tree." A tear eases down his cheek. Jeremy is unable to move his hands to brush it away.

Kwok clears his throat, embarrassed perhaps. "This is a rare opportunity you've been given," he says after a moment. "I have removed the necrotic organ; it is no longer attached. Look at this heart now—examine it carefully—but realize this flesh is no longer part of you."

"What are you going to do with it?" Dexter says.

"The ancient Egyptians thought that when you died your sins were measured by weighing your heart against an ostrich feather." Kwok's voice is becoming strange, slow and resonant. "Nowadays, we simply incinerate it." The words ooze out slow as ketchup.

"What's happening," Jeremy says, "what's wrong with your voice? Dexter, why's he talking like the Wizard of Oz?"

"You're slowing down, Doc," Dexter says. "We're losing him."

"Amphetamines must be wearing off," Kwok rumbles. "Hypodermic. Upper ... left ... drawer ..." His voice is now so deep Jeremy can feel its vibration through his teeth.

Jeremy hears Dexter move to the desk, drawers being pulled out, contents rattling.

"Got it!" Dexter yells. "Don't worry, Germ. We'll get the old junkie revved up." Footsteps coming closer. "Jesus, these needles creep me out."

Air whistles out of Kwok like a punctured balloon, followed by a deep breath in.

"Get a move on," Jeremy says, "before something else goes wrong."

"I'm attaching the turtle heart now," says Kwok, speaking quickly. "When that's done I'll close up, and give you an electrical jumpstart to get your heartbeat going." His voice has become a rapid squeak.

"Now he sounds like a munchkin," Jeremy shouts. "What did you shoot him up with, helium?"

Kwok says something, but it's the indecipherable squawk of fastforward tape.

"I can't tell what's going on," Dexter says. "He's moving too fast for me to follow. Cross your fingers."

"I can't move my fingers."

"Then cross your fucking eyes, or something. I don't—"

Something like the huge and heavy hand of god smacks Jeremy on the chest. He opens his mouth to scream but darkness pours down his throat and smothers all sound.

Someone is slapping his face, none too gently. "I'm up," he mumbles, "Pour me a coffee," and opens his eyes.

Dexter is looking down at him. "How do you feel?"

"I don't know," Jeremy says. "Paralyzed. Hungry. I could go for some sushi. You have any of those chocolate eggs left?"

"Your heart, my friend, your heart. Can you feel it beating?" Dexter slaps out a triumphant conga rhythm on Jeremy's chest.

"I guess..." Jeremy rolls his head back and forth. "I've got a pounding headache, anyway. What about Kwok?"

"He blurred out. I could have given him too high a dose. He kept speeding up until I couldn't see him anymore."

"What are you saying exactly?"

"The operation was a success," Dexter says, "but the doctor died." He crosses himself. "Listen, we gotta get out of here. I peeked in the other room, the receptionist is coming up to speed. She'll be wondering why we're here and Kwok isn't."

"Are you planning to carry me out?"

"Figured it out," Dexter says. "I saw a trolley in the waiting room. Stay here, I'll grab it."

"What is that, stay here? Is that a joke? You're quite the comedian, hey? You'd be a big hit with quadriplegics, at least they couldn't throw anything at you."

Dexter is back a moment later with an upright wheeled trolley. "We are mobile!" he announces, strapping Jeremy on with a pair of bungee cords.



By the time they got back to the Ennui, Jeremy had regained some motor control. Dexter helped him back to their booth. Around them, the other patrons were moving again, slowly restarting, like a family returning to motion after posing for a photograph.

Dexter fished an egg out of his coat pocket and started to unwrap the foil.

"Here you go, hon," said the waitress, sliding Jeremy's breakfast onto the table.

"Wow," he said, glancing up at her, "that's some quick service."

The scars on her arms flashed white as her teeth, as she smiled and moved on.

"Do you think," Jeremy said, "that Kwok's death increased my whatever you called it—karmic mass—and that's what—"

"I think my doctor's name is Earwax," Dexter said, "and this Kwok guy, I never heard of him." He bit into the egg. "What kind of name is that, anyway, Kwok?"

"Right," Jeremy said, stirring his coffee. "I see your point." He raised his glass in a half-toast. "Herman Kwok, D.D., O.D., R.I.P."

"I'll tell you the worst thing about today," Dexter said. "I'm out twenty bucks." He sighed, looking across the room at Big Charlie. "That greedy schmuck'll live longer than I do." He shrugged. "You were right, after all. Nothing's gonna happen today."

Beyond the dusty glass, outside this small sanctuary of hashbrowns and coffee and cigarettes, it was beginning to rain. •

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*A brief summery of some of the  
alternate therapy techniques for  
dealing with the numerous problems  
that affect computers....*

# Alternate Therapy for Your Computer

Karl Johanson

INCREASING NUMBERS OF PEOPLE ARE IGNORING STANDARD allopathic<sup>1</sup> computer troubleshooting techniques and are spending ever more amounts of money on alternate therapies for computer troubles. Listed here is a brief summery of some of the alternate therapy techniques for dealing with the numerous problems that affect computers.

## **Massage therapy:**

Massage therapy is intended to increase the electricity flow through the computer. Oh sure, the skeptics who've actually measured the speed of electricity with and without massage, say it isn't affected by massage.

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<sup>1</sup>In keeping with those who mistakenly label evidence-based medicine "allopathic medicine," the term "allopathic" is used here without regard to what the word actually means.

But aren't they the same people who've measured & demonstrated that massage on humans doesn't increase blood flow?

- *Swedish Massage*: Swedish massage involves having a blond person massage your computer.
- *Rolfing*: Rolfing involves massaging the computer hard enough to damage the internal circuits on the computer. If this therapy makes you're computer worse, don't worry, the problems are merely a result of the computer being cleansed of bad programs.
- *Shiatsu*: One of the most noteworthy aspects of shiatsu massage for your computer is that very few people seem to be able to pronounce it properly.
- *Shitzu shiatzu*: This technique involves letting your dog walk about on your computer. Can't hurt ... much ...

### Acupuncture:

Western technological thinking has lead to the mistaken belief that computers work by electricity flowing through circuits and wires. Computers, like life forms, work by the flow of "chi" through "meridians." Sticking needles into the computer at various points along the "meridians" allows the "chi" to be "rebalanced." Don't expect to be able to do this yourself. Neither chi nor the meridians can be detected by any known scientific technique. The only way to get the needles in the right place is to give lots of money to someone who claims they happen to know where the undetectable special points on the invisible meridians are.

### Acupressure:

Exactly the same as acupuncture, only you're paying someone who claims to know exactly where to press on things instead of where to stab them.

### Herbal Cures:

- *Parsley*: helps parsing your hard drive.
- *Echinacea*: commonly prescribed for computer viruses.
- *Thyme*: was used extensively for Y2K issues.
- *Super blue-green algae*: Looks great with two of the IMacs. (And

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<sup>2</sup> "Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Programming":  
*New Jersey Journal of Medicine, Computer Science and Cheese*.  
Aug, 1948.

doesn't "algae" sound much better than the correct term "cyanobacteria"?)

- *Acidophilus*: Don't really know what this does for your computer, but anything with that cool a name must be good for something. Sounds kind of like a city full of those canoe headed aliens with the acidic blood that Sigourney Weaver fought.
- *Ginkgo Biloba*: Good for speeding up your computer.
- *St. John's Wort*: Used for dealing with keyboards which have had their keys depressed too often.
- *Garlic*: Keeps other people from messing around with your computer and wrecking it or changing stuff.
- *Shark Cartilage*: (Don't ask me how this gets listed as an "herb.") Sharks don't get bone cancer (as they don't have bones) so this proves that shark cartilage will cure cancer. Additionally, sharks never suffer from hard drive failure (for much the same reason they don't get bone cancer), so this proves that shark cartilage cures hard drive failures.
- *Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme*: This combination of herbs should help your computer's memory and make your computer love you more.

Be prepared to pay extra to herbalists who claim to be able to feel intuitively which herb combinations will affect your computers "synergistically." Synergy is worth paying for, even if the only evidence you have of synergistic effects is the claims of intuition of the person who sold you the stuff in the first place.

### **Chi Therapy:**

If acupuncture or acupressure doesn't successfully rebalance the chi in your computer, you may wish to consider adding more chi to your computer. The easiest way to get a chi upgrade is to order some from me and I'll upload it to your computer via e-mail. Make sure you don't deal with false chi sales organizations though, as they're only there to rip off gullible people.

### **Chi Chi Therapy:**

This technique is especially important if you have an old, worn out keyboard at your desk at work, but your boss won't let you get a new one. Mix up some pineapple, coconut milk and ice cubes (and a half teaspoon full of grenadine, if you like) in a blender. Fill a glass with this mixture then leave it near your keyboard. The next time your boss brings

some work by, pretend that he has bumped your arm, causing you to spill the chi chi drink onto your keyboard. The combination of chemicals in the drink will render your keyboard worthless and your boss will have to authorize you to get a new one.

### **Cleansing:**

Many people who make lots of money selling books know that toxins accumulate in your computer over time. The fact that none of them seem to know what any of these actual toxins are shouldn't dissuade you from making use of cleansing therapy. The details of computer cleansing are a little to graphic for me to get into here.

### **Computer Aura Reading:**

Seeing a computer's aura is an easy thing for anyone to do. Turn all the lights out in your computer room. Turn up the brightness on your computer as high as it will go. Sit very close to your computer and hold your eyes open staring at the centre of your screen for at least five minutes. Allow your eyes to move around the screen again or sit further back in your chair. The computer's aura should be clearly visible now. If you see the computer's aura without going through the above procedure, the problem with your computer is obvious. You're using it too much. Go do something else for a while.

### **Crystal Healing:**

Having the right crystal sitting somewhere near your computer allows the "vibrational energy" of the crystal to be transferred into the computer circuits. Somehow the crystal knows to send its energy to the computer circuits and somehow this is good for your computer in a way that only a cynic would want explained in any detail.

- Silicon is the type of crystal most commonly used for computers. Many people point out that some of the "crystals" you can buy are actually cut glass, which is an amorphous rather than crystalline solid. This doesn't matter though. If it looks crystalish it will be just as effective as a real crystal at transferring vibrational energy.
- Germanium is an excellent crystal, which most computers can relate to. Confusions between germanium and geranium shouldn't be of much concern. There's probably some aromatherapy benefit from putting some geraniums near your computer.
- Going out and finding yourself a neat rock somewhere probably



won't have any useful effect on your computer, even though most of the rocks you find will be crystalline. Better to buy a crystal from a proprietor who claims to be sensitive to the vibrational energies of crystals.

### **Counseling:**

This school of thought contends that most problems with computers stem from conflicts with their motherboards. Extended counseling for \$100 per hour or more can help your computer deal with its problems by wallowing in them. It's very important for your computer to realize that just because it is having trouble reading it's hard drive doesn't mean it's a failure.

### **Aromatherapy:**

Aroma therapies have been proven as an effective method for repairing computers in an article a friend of mine read a while back in some issue of a magazine I can't remember the title of. Various scents affect your computer in a variety of positive ways.

- The smell of apples helps prevent the claustrophobic feeling Mac computers sometimes feel when they get overwhelmed by the market share PCs have of the home computer market.
- The smell of Skittles, coffee and Doritos is very good for your computer's sense of self worth. It makes your computer feel that you are one of those loyal computer users who doesn't leave every time something inconsequential comes up: such as having to eat a proper meal.
- The smell of money is very therapeutic for your computer. It convinces the computer that any day now you'll be buying it a new DVD drive, mouse with 13 buttons, 21-inch monitor, sound card that goes up to 11, honking supply of RAM, cables with platinum coated connectors, etc. Use conservative amounts of this aroma therapy, though. The smell of too much money smells a lot like a new computer on the way.
- The smell of oranges reminds computer users that their bodies require vitamin C in order to walk, talk move about, or do anything on the computer. In practice this aromatherapy inspires consumption of orange flavored pop more often than consumption of anything containing nutrients. Maybe it's for the best.
- The smell of ozone is very bad for your computer. If the power supply or any other part of your computer starts making significant

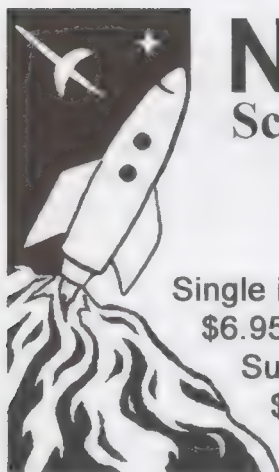
amounts of ozone, then replace that part. Once the ozone is no longer being produced, the aromatic harmony of your computer will be restored and it will work better.

### **Feng Shui:**

Perhaps the problem with your computer is merely a result of the furniture in your room being in the wrong places. For instance, if you're having trouble reading your computer screen, it may mean that your chair is on the wrong side of the monitor. Before hiring a qualified software or hardware expert to handle your computer problems, you may wish to consider paying someone several hundred dollars to rearrange your furniture for you. Clearly only those made cynical by modern scientific and technological thinking would refuse to accept this idea uncritically. What do you have to lose (other than your time, several hundred dollars and your self-respect)?

### **RTFM Therapy:**

This radical new alternative method of fixing computer problems involves the user actually taking time to read the included manuals and follow instructions listed there. This fringe idea is rejected by most computer users and professionals and isn't expected to catch on. •



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*He couldn't deny that the incident (he was already burying it deep, burying it and paving it over and building a Wal-Mart on top of it) had shaken him. But what had happened, really?...*

# Reunion

## Jack Skillingstead

LAWRENCE DARBY SAT STIFFLY IN THE BACK OF THE LINCOLN Continental, fighting it, fighting it. His left hand clawed discreetly at the plush leather seat. With his right hand he fondled the small teddy bear in his overcoat pocket.

Twelve hours earlier, in desperation, he'd instructed his secretary to book him a flight and arrange for a limo to meet him at the airport in Seattle. For a long, puzzled moment there had been silence on the intercom, and then she had said, "Yes, sir, Mr. Darby. Shall I cancel the department meeting?" Darby hadn't known what to reply, and that frightened him as much as anything else. "Use your best judgement," he'd finally said. "And Nancy? Get me a window seat."

First class on the Boeing 767 red-eye out of JFK. He traveled a lot but always requested an inboard seat, not wanting to be distracted from his laptop computer, the details, his work. Darby had a reputation for ruthlessness. He'd heard himself described as cold, humorless. A bastard. But no one could challenge his prominence on Wall Street.

Always an inboard seat. Except this time. This time he leaned into the window, experienced tingling exhilaration when the plane banked steeply, the long starboard wing pivoting them over doll houses and shrunken trees. It was like something starting to come alive in him again, crying out to come alive. It frightened him. The crying out was distant and he was going to it.

The bear had been left in the slip pocket on the back of the seat in front of him, a stuffed bear small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. It peeked over the top of the slip pocket, its nose caught on the pleated elastic seam, one rudimentary paw raised as if to wave. A toy, a child's toy. Darby glanced at his seat mate then surreptitiously palmed the bear and tucked it under his coat, not knowing why but feeling he must have it.

Now the Lincoln ghosted along broad residential streets twenty miles south of Seattle, past old frame houses, the carports and yards cluttered with children's toys, bikes dead on their sides, cheap molded plastic swimming pools. Darby stared out the window at TV antennas belted to chimneys, flaking paint, a few nice lawns and many that were neglected, weeds sprouting from sidewalk cracks. A working class neighborhood. Lawrence Darby sat in the limo like a visitor from another dimension, though this was the place where he had grown up, the place from which he'd come.

"Here," Darby said. "Stop here."

The driver pulled into the curb and braked smoothly.

"Wait for me right here," Darby said. The driver half turned his head, nodded, a stranger, a man older than Darby and obedient to Darby's money, the shiny visor of his cap slanted over his eyebrows.

Darby walked a block then stopped and looked back at the Lincoln parked under the messy shade of elms. *What am I doing here?* he thought. He felt anxious that the driver would leave him, abandon him. Darby clenched his teeth, fighting it, fighting the encroaching feeling of vulnerability, of helplessness. He had to get a grip, *focus*. But focus on what?

He walked around the block and stood before a modest Rambler with wood-framed windows and a cinderblock chimney. There was a little girl in the driveway. Five, maybe six years old, wearing a blue jumper and red sneakers, her hair so blonde it was almost white. She sat on a big-wheeled plastic bike that she was much too big for, pushing herself forward and back, her knees higher than the handlebars. Up and down both sides of the driveway the owner of the house had planted giant plastic sunflowers and their petals twirled in the morning breeze.

The girl was watching him very closely. Darby said, "Hello," but she didn't reply, just continued to push herself forward and back on the

toddler's bike.

This had been Darby's house. Decades ago he had lived here with his sister and his mother and father. Incredible. Standing there now he sensed he was closer to the crying out, closer than he had been back in New York, but not close enough. This wasn't the place he needed to be. He was about to turn away when the little girl said a strange thing.

"Are you lost?" she asked.

A chill laced up his back.

*Are you lost?*

"Oh my God," he mumbled.

Back in the limo he slammed the door, gave the driver a new destination, then slumped down in the seat, stunned by what he was remembering. Not remembering; this was different from remembering. It was as if he had awakened and found a gaping cavity in his chest, had realized that he was not a living man at all but an animated body.

The Lincoln fled east, toward the Cascade Mountains. Darby squeezed the stuffed bear in his pocket. For a moment back there at his old house he had been tempted to give the bear away to the little girl in the driveway. But now he knew the toy was for another purpose, a purpose he didn't yet understand.

It had been thirty-five years but Darby easily directed the limo driver to a trail head in the National Forest north of Mount Rainer. Being a weekday afternoon only a few cars were parked in the vehicle area. The limo coasted into a slot and the driver killed the engine.

For almost five minutes Darby was unable to move. He cowered in the backseat of the car, working his hands together in his lap, tears spilling from his eyes, overwhelmed by emotions and fears he had not experienced since early childhood. The driver, a perfect professional, did not ask if Darby was all right or if he could do anything. Instead he sat rigidly behind the wheel and stared out the windshield. A drowning piece of Darby admired him for it.

Finally Darby forced himself to open the door. He put one foot out on the gravel, then the other, then stood, still holding onto the door, reluctant to let go. He leaned back inside the car and spoke to the driver.

"I'll be back in a little while," he said, as if to reassure himself.

"Yes, sir," the driver said.

Still Darby couldn't force himself to leave. Anything was better than enduring by himself the burden of loneliness and fear that was now sweeping over him in wave after wave.

"You know," he said to the back of the driver's head, "When I was a boy I got lost in this forest."



At the word “lost” Darby’s voice broke, and the driver twitched almost imperceptibly. Then, because he seemed called upon to say *something*, the driver asked:

“Was it for very long, sir?”

Darby swallowed. “Three days. Almost four.”

“That’s a very long time to be lost.”

“It was hell,” Darby said, remembering it, really remembering it for the first time in decades. “Pure hell.”

“Three days is a long time.”

“Almost four,” Darby said. “It was getting dark again when I finally gave in and they let me go.”

In the rearview mirror the driver’s eyes opened a little wider. “Sir?”

“Never mind.”

At last Darby withdrew from the limo and walked into the forest. It was dark under the trees, dark for a summer afternoon. Darby hadn’t slept for over twenty-four hours. He kept the small blue bear in his right hand as he walked.

After fifteen minutes or so he departed from the trail. It happened in a strange way. The bear had seemed to *twist* in his hand—like the monkey’s paw in a story he’d been required to read in high school—and Darby had known this was the place to leave the trail. The same place where he had deviated from the trail thirty-five years ago. Then he had been a five year old walking behind his older sister and his father, and he had decided impulsively to angle off the trail with the idea of tracking ahead and surprising them by suddenly jumping out in front of them. Instead he had become hopelessly lost. He had seen a chipmunk standing perkily on the trunk of a fallen tree. Not a squirrel—he had seen millions of those—but a real chipmunk; there was no mistaking the tail. It watched him as he approached, its little head cocked to the side, and just when Larry Darby was so close he could have reached out and petted it, the chipmunk jumped from the tree and shot away. He had run after it a little way. That’s all it took. His sense of direction was gone. He had attempted to find the trail again but it was as if there *was* no trail. He had called out for his father, for Angie, but no one called back. He had been *five*. Instead of remaining in one spot he had kept moving, his fear growing until he was running and crying and a terrible and hopeless emptiness had opened within him.

Three days. Almost four.

Darby saw the rotting trunk of the fallen tree. He was forty years old, not five, but the great cavity had opened inside him again and all the haunted fears of his childhood came thundering back in.

It was the same tree, of course, almost entirely taken over by green

moss and pallid saucer-shaped mushrooms, rotted and sunken and collapsed—but the same tree.

Darby sat down on it, the rotted wood cracking softly. He held the bear in his hand. A child's toy bear covered with nappy blue fur. He was a little frightened of it since it moved. But he held it and listened to the ghostly cries of a lost child that had called him across a continent to be in this place. He looked down at his scuffed Italian shoes, his Wall Street shoes, and he remembered how on the evening of the third day they had come for him, whispering in the voices of a dream, flitting between the trees like gauzy shadows, circling him. Now, thinking about them with the fluttering shreds of his adult intellect, Darby wondered if he had seen them because he had been half-starved. Mystics fasted in solitude to prepare themselves to receive visitations. Had that been part of it, that hunger combined with his child's wide open mind? Of course later when he walked out to meet the searchers he had told them about the shadow things, or tried to. His father had explained to him about hallucinations, and he had accepted that, more so with each passing year. But now he knew that it was a lie, that the shadows had been real.

Darby sensed a presence and stiffened.

"Mister?"

Lawrence Darby looked up into the distorted mirror of time, into the face of a boy—his own face.

"Please, mister, I'm lost."

Darby dropped the bear.

"I want to come home," the boy said, his voice choked and thin. He was dressed in jeans and a short-sleeved checked shirt. He looked hungry, his eyes hideously bright with fear and hope. It was himself, little Larry Darby, the way he had appeared thirty-five years ago when the whispering shadows had slipped from the ancient darkness under the forest and circled him, and Darby had sensed their hunger every bit as intense as his own.

"I'm sorry," Darby said. The void within him ached to be filled, to take the child back. But he couldn't. The Lawrence Darby who had walked out of this forest more than three decades ago could not accept into himself this quivering, lost waif. I have to leave the boy, he thought.

*Leave the boy.* It's what they had whispered to him. Leave the boy, let us have him and you, the real you, can go.

Three days alone. No food, freezing at night, terrified. The search parties never even came close. But he heard the whispering inside his mind, saw the weird shadows—the whispering devils. They had tricked him, somehow, always leading him away from the trail, away from rescue, drawing him in deeper and deeper. A child could not have survived. He

had to bargain with them or he would have died. Died of hunger, or exposure. Or loneliness.

*Leave the boy, leave him for us and go, be strong, be free...*

"I'm sorry," Darby said again, standing, looking into the eyes of his own divided soul. Hating himself as he knew others hated him but unable to allow the weakness back in.

"Don't go!" Larry cried.

Darby turned away, fumbled over the dead tree, thinking the boy wouldn't be able to follow him beyond that point. He braced himself against the screams of the child, filled the empty place with steel. And soon there was no screaming, only the sound of the wind. Don't look back, he told himself. But he did look back, one more time. Because he knew he could do it; he was strong and the empty place was steel. He turned and saw that it was true: Larry hadn't been able to follow him. The boy was still standing by the fallen tree, a ghostly waif. Darby could actually see through him as the boy slowly dimmed away. And just before he completely vanished something gauzy and black slipped over him. Darby shuddered.

He started walking back to the parking area, the steel heavy in him. He stumbled and fell, got up, cursing under his breath. He looked back. The forest was silent. The place where he'd left—Darby swallowed—where he'd left the boy, looked no different from any other place among the monotonous columns of Pine trees.

Darby walked on a little farther then stopped again. A strange thought occurred to him. He made the thought into words and spoke it in his mind: I'm not ready. And it was true. He wasn't ready to resume his seat in the limousine where he'd be forced to stare at the back of the impertinent driver's head during the long drive to the airport. Even if the driver never said a word he would still be thinking that there was something wrong with Darby, that Darby was a little off. And those impertinent ideas would manifest themselves in tiny movements of the driver's head, a certain attitude of his shoulders. Not that Darby couldn't deal with that kind of thing. But he wanted to deal with it coolly, in control. He had lost control earlier, and the driver had witnessed it. That was the whole problem. So maybe he'd just wait a bit, walk around, master himself completely, then return to the limo.

He couldn't deny that the incident (he was already burying it deep, burying it and paving it over and building a Wal-Mart on top of it) had shaken him. But what had happened, really? Certainly he had overworked himself lately. Certainly this little adventure or whatever you wanted to call it, trip down memory lane or whatever, wasn't it something

like a midlife crisis? Nothing more profound than the faintly ridiculous impulse of a man past forty growing weepy over an ancient and best forgotten misadventure of his childhood.

But what he'd just seen.

He hadn't seen anything.

And he couldn't see very well even now. His vision was blurred. He wiped at his eyes roughly, with the heels of his hands. He walked faster, as if he could walk away from his thoughts. His heart thudded in his chest, he stumbled, groped forward, the undergrowth grabbing at his slacks. Finally he stopped.

And he was lost.

He couldn't see the sky. The trees towered around him, ancient and solemn. There was not a breath of wind. Darby's own breath rasped in his throat. He tried to blunder back the way he'd come, but he didn't know what way that was. He kept falling. His shoes chaffed raw blisters through his thin businessman's socks. Somewhere, he'd lost his watch. He sat panting on the ground.

"It's all right," the voice of a young boy said. "Don't cry."

"I'm not crying." But he was.

"I know the way out. But you have to take me with you."

Darby didn't say anything.

"This is the last chance," the boy said. "Please."

"I—"

"Go ahead," the boy said.

"I'm scared," Darby said, his voice shaky, and he began to sob without restraint.

After a while he looked up, and he was alone. I've always been alone, he thought. He started walking again, but calmly, without panic. After a while he saw a pair of hikers with daypacks and walking sticks, and he angled toward them and picked up the trail, and just as easily as that, he was on his way back to the parking area.

In the limo, speeding along with the trees flashing by his window, Darby began to smile a little.

"I don't think there ever were any shadows," he said.

"Sir?" The driver flicked his gaze to the rear-view mirror.

"What's your name, driver?" Darby asked, suddenly interested.

"Campbell."

"I mean, what's your first name?" Darby said.

"Thomas," the driver said. "Tom."

"Well, Tom, thanks for driving me around today."

The driver nodded. "You're welcome, sir." •

*It had started in sparks, seven years ago. The glint of her anklet. The flash of her smile. He, shot through with a bolt like lightning. She, illuminated from the inside out. Static between their skins...*

# Seven Years

Megan Crewe

Earl laid her on the table's vinyl padding. He wiped her forehead with dampened gauze.

"It'll just hurt a moment, really," he said. "A little crackle through the skull."

Not like the shudder when she'd slammed the bedroom door behind her, when she'd lanced him with her glare and opened her mouth: *Enough, this is the last time, slinking in at midnight, you live in your lab from now on you can sleep there.*

Her eyelids fluttered. He brushed them still.

*Don't touch me don't try, you stink, burnt vinegar, hear me this once go.*

The blood in her cheek was clouding into a bruise. He never would have, if she hadn't said it, if she hadn't—

*I never loved you anyway.*

His throat ached with an uncried sob. His fingers tripped across the tray. Never mind. He would fix that mistake. And all others.

He smoothed electrodes to her temples as the checkered box beneath his elbow murmured. Its panes blinked numeric neon pupils.



It had started in sparks, seven years ago. The glint of her anklet. The flash of her smile. He, shot through with a bolt like lightning. She, illuminated from the inside out. Static between their skins.

Seven years. Seven years of harmony allotted, before the marital ceiling rotted through and crashed down in splinters of disappointment. The glow smothered in the rubble.

It had been worth it: the late hours, the migraines, the pinching of his sinuses as he squinted over lines of data, fumbled curlicues of wire. Worth it so that he could pin-point their failure in silver dots on the hollows of her head. Revive the electricity. Burn out the pain. Erase.

The dial clicked under the pressure of his thumb. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

Seven years—of memory.

He flipped the switch. Her flesh twitched. The current ran backward.

All the way back, she looked like she was sleeping, leaned against the car window the way she'd dozed on the flight home from their Parisian honeymoon. He carried her over the threshold, laid her on the bed's white sheets. The window was open, the photographs cleared from the ledge. A breeze stirred the canopy like a veiled ghost.

Her eyelids fluttered, and opened.

"Earl," she said. "Are we back already? I hardly remember the plane. I wish we could just live in France. It was gorgeous." Her fingers grazed his cheek. "God, I love you."

Warmth uncurled like petals in his chest; he smiled. "I told you so," he said. •

*He is not alone, he realizes; the  
GODHEAD is here, calling to him,  
reminding him of his purpose: he must  
warn Gary about the steel bullet, about  
the ruby bloom...*

# Ruby Bloom

Todd Bryanton

HE AWAKENS WITH THE MUSIC OF THE GODHEAD SINGING through his veins.

His eyes open slowly: a belated crescendo. Strange atonal sounds like a thousand orchestras tuning to different notes, alien melodies flowering at the edges of consciousness. A single dissonant note rising out of the primal hum, swelling like a womb: *Where am I?* Not the words themselves; just the instinct, the basic feeling that haunts every dreamer upon waking. The sense that the surroundings are a little less real, the boundary a little less solid: some wordless intuition that if you turn your head, you might see the wallpaper shuddering like skin. Most of us deny this thought by clinging to the world of experience: hot water scouring our skin, bitter coffee inflaming our insides, the texture of newspaper beneath our fingers promising visions of war and weather and politics and progress—all real, all sane.

But some people can't outrun their intuitions. Some people peel back the skin and see the blood that churns beneath.

He closes his eyes and hears it, sees it, tastes it. White cells course through his capillaries, trailing grand Wagnerian melodies. The whistling harmony of his breath races through his lungs like a mighty woodwind, underscored by the rhythmic boom of his heart—a timpani blasting through his chest, through his head, mouth squirting saliva like the trilling whine of flutes; he swallows (phlegmy bass note building deep inside his throat like the angry blat of a bassoon) and his pulse races and gallops in his ears growing faster faster fortissimo faster—he *can't breathe it's too much*—

He opens his eyes and the music stops. It's all around him: the holy essence of the GODHEAD. A terrifying beam, a strange brilliance, a pure white starflare. No noise, no sound—just that all-pervading cocoon, eclipsing everything. Once, in a former life, he thought he knew the color white; he thought he recognized it in the flickering of fluorescent lights, in the artificial shine of moviestar teeth. Now he knows better. The brilliance and purity of the GODHEAD makes these things look like faded newsprint by comparison.

He throws back the blanket and walks toward the light.

*"Marcus?"*

*No answer from K. He knows that the man with the clipboard wants answers, but K doesn't have the right ones.*

*"Marcus? Mr. Kristofferson?"*

*Silence.*

*"I have a few questions for you."*

*Mona Lisa smile.*

*"Are you aware of the diagnosis?"*

*A pause. K appears to think—a caricature of deliberation, a parody of pondering. "Yes," he finally responds. The slight smile still tugs at the corners of his lips; he looks like a man building towards a particularly witty punchline. "Marked by grandiose delusions, persecution complexes. In some cases, active hallucinations. Bipolar tendencies." He pauses again, then begins to recite in a mechanical voice, like a schoolboy who has been forced to memorize a poem: "Victims may experience strange perceptions, or feel that their thoughts and emotions have been inspired by outside agencies. Their speech may appear logical and well-organized, or disjointed and confused; in extreme cases, some patients become completely catatonic." K sighs: a mocking sigh, a smiling sigh. "Covers a lot, doesn't it?"*

*The man with the clipboard blinks twice. "Are you aware of the proposed treatment?"*

*"I happen to know that you're not real," says K. A slight grimace threatens the tranquility of his smiling mask. "You're a symbol. Little black bag, little house on*

*the prairie. The good old days. Do you understand?"*

*"No, Mr. Kristofferson, I don't think I do."*

*K waves his left hand dismissively. "I'll have to hug you for that."*

*The man with the clipboard shifts slightly in his chair, begins again. "Are you aware of the proposed treatment for—"*

*"Medication," says K. "Medication, medication, medication. Meta-dictation."*

*"You have taken medication for this condition before?"*

*"Right. But not for my condition."*

*"By your own admission, these visions are—"*

*"Potential symptoms," K interrupts. "Yes. Correct. All of the above."*

*"So you admit that these visions are byproducts of—"*

*"Wrong," snaps K. "Incorrect."*

*"And why is that, Mr. Kristofferson?"*

*K's smile widens almost imperceptibly.*

*"Because I am the true prophet of the GODHEAD."*

In the beginning, there was the word: so sayeth the book.

But what else would you expect a book to say? He knows better. He knows that the beginning is wordless. Unnamable: an unsolvable cipher, a numberless equation, a light that casts no shadow.

He closes his eyes and prepares to receive communion.

At first, the vision does not come. Just the unstoppable glare of the beam forcing past his closed eyes, highlighting purple veins. He waits. A few words skip like pebbles across the glassy surface of his mind: *Meditation. Medication. Meta-dictation.*

Waiting.

Suddenly the Vision explodes outward from the center of his brain—a crimson flash, an infinitesimal moment of chaos, head snapping back as if receiving a physical blow/struck by the awesome force of the true source/**YHWH YHWH YHWH—**

Then nothing. Nothing except the afterglow, the purple tendrils exposed against translucent eyelid flesh.

He does not have to wait long before the vision repeats, puncturing the boundary for slightly longer this time. For a second he sees a red flower, blooming impossibly fast. A stop-motion carnation, a crimson incarnation of... of what?

Then, as quickly as it came, it disappears. His mind can't hold the imprint; everything keeps slipping, changing. He can't decide whether the flower bloomed outwards or shriveled inwards. Another repetition. This time the mental camera is farther away, providing a better vantage point. The red flower withers and blooms against a blue background. A

sky, a sea, punctuated by whitecaps of foam, by wisps of cloud—he can't decide which. The beauty of the vision defies analysis.

Hypnotic. Expanding and withering. A lifecycle rendered in seconds.

With each repetition he feels himself grow more distant, able to see more as the chronology moves backwards. A new sight replaces the flower: a winged bullet, a gleaming steel deity arching past the sun. Without warning, the bullet transforms into the expanding flower, the withering bloom. The next cycle goes faster: the bullet shreds through the sky, dives directly into the budding flower. The bullet zips backward once more—clouds flying past like bearded gods—then rushes forward into the oncoming flower. The dance is beautiful, inevitable.

He can feel himself entering the empty place inside himself, the void that devours everything but Vision. There is no time, no space—only this bullet flowering inside his brain, this endless ruby bloom. He cannot truly know how long he resides within himself, jaw clenching and unclenching, Adam's apple bobbing, sweat pooling in his shoulders, his armpits, the small of his back. He doesn't feel it, though, not really; it's happening to someone else.

How many repetitions, how many lifecycles? He'll never know. But one thought slowly emerges, one certainty amongst the flux.

The gleaming steel projectile is not a bullet, he realizes. It's an airplane. He's never been on a plane, never even seen one up close, but it's a familiar thing. He's seen them so many times on television. An airplane blooming into a flower: a sight more intimate, more familiar, than the stranger's face that stares back at him from the mirror each morning.

His breath whistles inside his skull like the all-encompassing whine of a turbine engine. He is becoming Vision.

Faster, faster, faster—the plane arching backwards, away from the ruby bloom, returning to the earth, to the glitter of runway lights. Exploding forwards at impossible speed, returning to the flower once more. Backwards, reality rewinding. The plane lands; passengers pour out like ants fleeing a collapsing hive. He follows the ants backward through a long tunnel, emerging into a giant, glassy structure, high-domed—some sort of modern cathedral. Disembodied voices chant departure times over hidden intercoms, strange incantations, Latin mass. He is very scared—he wants to open his eyes and escape this strange vision—but he knows that this is not an option. He must follow this soundless music to the very end.

He drifts behind the passengers as they walk backwards into the departure lounge; wraithlike faces fly past him, eyes shining like coins. He continues to advance into the depths of the airport terminal, moving



with a real sense of purpose now—he can feel it. Finally his eyes focus on a single man. The man’s eyebrows furrow slightly, as if the man’s mind is somewhere else; the man does not merely look preoccupied, but genuinely *absent*. A familiar man; a familiar expression.

A slight bloom of recognition, expanding and withering inside his mind. It’s impossible—

*dear god its me im there in the airport*

and yet—

*THEY put me there THEY did it because THEY—*

A new voice shouts just above his left ear, deafeningly loud, something huge and inhuman:

**NO**

*How could I be in the airport when—*

**NO**

The voice is right. The man in the airport looks similar—the same blue eyes, the same broad mouth—but not quite the same. Not quite the same, and yet, there is something about the man’s face that is strikingly familiar.

He concentrates harder, willing himself to recognize the man before the flow of time reverses, before the man boards the plane and disappears into the ruby bloom waiting in the sky.

And then he realizes. Far worse than he ever could have imagined.

*Gary?*

Could it be—

*Gary? Gary? Can you hear me? Gary!*

For an instant, he pictures a tiny squalling nugget of pale flesh, a newborn wrapped in white, so white against the white sheets and white hospital walls; a crystalline image, perfectly preserved, and somehow he senses that this image has left the country of Now and entered the kingdom of Was. Gary—his son, his dear baby boy—isn’t a baby anymore, Gary is a grown man, Gary moved away and now Gary is about to board the winged bullet, Gary’s about to eat the ruby bloom, his only son, he can’t let this—

**YOU MUST WARN HIM**

His eyes fly open and the light invades his sockets, sending shockwaves of physical pain through his skull, but he can’t let that stop him, because that is what THEY want, and he has to warn Gary before THEY—

**THE TELEPHONE**

Of course! He sobs with gratitude, lunging for the receiver. He must call Gary, warn him about the steel tube, about the ants fleeing their hive, about the flowering bloom—

*Hello? Gary?*

No sound escapes the telephone. The line is dead. Cut off. Might just be an unpaid bill, except he knows better: THEY did this. THEY are still listening, hidden deep down in the receiver. THEY are waiting at the other end laughing at him with their smirking lips, blackened eyes looming like gun barrels—

*Gary dear Jesus please help me—*

**THERE IS NO TIME**

*Gary promise me you'll be very careful tell me you'll be a good boy tell me—*

**GET OUT!**

He drops the phone and flees the house.

*"You were prescribed medication?"*

*"Yes. Anti-psychotics at first. Then neuroleptics."*

*"Did anything change?"*

*"Yes. I stopped receiving the Vision."*

*"Did you experience any negative side-effects?"*

*"Yes. I stopped receiving the Vision."*

The man with the clipboard frowns. "What I mean, Mr. Kristofferson, is did you experience any depression, anxiety, or—"

"Yes." A pause, a blink, and then the same word, delivered in the same monotone, as if K forgot his first answer: "Yes."

*"Is that why you stopped taking the medication?"*

"I need to see," says K. He laughs, a deceptively casual laugh—but he feels as if he is choking. He shoves the words past his clenched teeth. "I need to save Gary."

*"Who is Gary, Mr. Kristofferson?"*

*"My son," he says.*

The man with the clipboard peeks at his file. The file does not mention any next-of-kin. The pen descends, scratches a note. The man with the clipboard looks up, opens his mouth to speak, but K interrupts in the same choked, measured tones:

*"I need to see. Do you understand me? Without it, I don't know where they are. Do you understand me?"*

*"Without what, Mr. Kristofferson?"*

*"The beam. The Vision. The GODHEAD."*

*"Please, Marcus." The man's pen poses over his clipboard, waiting to strike. "Tell me more about the godhead."*

*"Are you a religious man, Doctor?"*

The man with the clipboard frowns. In truth, he was raised Anglican, and enjoyed a casual, unimaginative faith as a child. At the time, God seemed like a kindly old uncle who lived far away—some picturesque place with snowy mountains and white fluffy clouds, like Switzerland or Denmark. You might send

Him a mental postcard from time to time—hello, how's the weather up there, wish you were here—but you didn't always expect an answer back. The man with the clipboard knows that his childhood God is very different from K's God. K's God is the burning man, vengeance personified: Old Testament, capital O, capital T.

"Doctor?" K repeats. "Are you a religious man?"

"Please, Marcus. These sessions are not about me. They are about you. I'm here to help you."

K laughs bitterly. "The priest never confesses; it's always the other way around." A pause. "Doctor. You seem like a reasonable man. You have to help me. All I'm asking... is, all I'm..."

The words follow his vacant sightline, land in the corners of the room, collect like dust.

The man with the clipboard senses that whatever minimal rapport he has established is at risk. He weighs his answer, finally relents. "Okay, Mr. Kristofferson. Yes. I believe in some form of higher power."

K snaps back to attention, his eyes suddenly electric. "Christian?"

"I guess you could say that."

K snorts. "Raised on Papal lies, no doubt."

"Actually, I'm a Protestant." Or was, at some point.

K snorts, rolls his eyes. "Doesn't matter; it's all the same in the end. People pray. They pray to all sorts of gods all the time. But only a few people get an answer, right?"

"You believe that you are one of these select few?"

"I do not have to believe. I am. What I am. And so on and so forth."

"And when you took the medication—did you feel the same way?"

K flinches. "You don't understand. I couldn't see. If I could still see, then I would know where *THEY* are." He pauses, closes his eyes so tightly that the lids look like puckered, half-healed scars. His Adam's apple bounces convulsively, dredging up words like phlegm. "If I could still see, I could—"

K stops. There are some certainties that defy words; for a miserable instant, he senses that Truth is too large to find a home within his throat, too big to squeeze past his mouth and take flight. He presses the palms of his hands against his eyes, willing himself to say something, anything, to make the man with the clipboard see the Truth, but the effort is futile. K doesn't have the right answers; at least, he doesn't have the ones that the man with the clipboard wants to hear.

"Thank you, Mr. Kristofferson," says the man with the clipboard. "I believe that this has been most helpful."

Later, when the man with the clipboard is alone, his pen descends with the speed and precision of an avenging angel.

■

The beam leads him forth into the urban desert.

High noon, Sunday, July, in this year of THEIR lord. A mingled stench attacks his nose: sweat, fried garbage, and something deceptively sweet, like melted candy. Weeds worm through sidewalk cracks, and the black-top pulses with heatbaked fever. THEY sit inside crumbling bungalows, accepting false offerings from flickering altars. He can sense their eyes peeping from behind half-opened blinds, scouring his skin. Contagion!

As he clamps his eyes shut, he becomes aware of an unholy drone building within the bowels of the earth, swooping down from the sky, swelling within his skull. So unlike the sweet symphony of his own body, this hellish cacophony: a scream attacking his brain with the precision of a surgical drill, shrieking higher, higher, *higher*, combined with a subsonic sound like a thousand gnashing teeth, like the basso-profundo roar of some furious engine.

And he knows: THEY are doing this! This is the sound of THEIR damnation made manifest!

He wants to speak, to shout, to scream, but the sound swallows his voice. He collapses and the asphalt burns his knees, ready to consume him. He is lost. Why is he here? *Why—*

But then he opens his eyes and the beam is there, so brilliantly white that it is all colors and none, a slash eclipsing the watery light of the sun. He is not alone, he realizes; the GODHEAD is here, calling to him, reminding him of his purpose: he must warn Gary about the steel bullet, about the ruby bloom.

The beam leads him forth once more. Feet slam down on concrete with the inevitability of justice: one, two, one, two, one, two. They are not his own, he realizes; these limbs, these phantom feet, move of their own volition. He senses himself lurching forward in a stranger's body. Slowly the unholy noise departs, retreating back into the core of the earth, into the airy depths of the sky, into the inner folds of his brain. A strange calm descends. Somewhere, far off, the sound of a lawnmower, like some exotic insect; the steady rhythm of his feet on concrete: one, two, one, two, one two.

Just when he is beginning to lose himself in the monotony of motion, he spots a group of children walking along the sidewalk towards him. Not just three or four, he realizes, but an entire exodus, a gibbering horde stoned on the unfolding promise of summer vacation. As they approach, they grow silent. Their eyes loom solemnly over sticky lips stained red by pixie stix and cream soda. Teeth flash unnaturally white within gory, grinning mouths.

Suddenly the inner scream explodes full volume, destroying all pre-

tence of rational thought, all dreams of space and time. A primitive premonition surges through his brain: *Damned, damned, all are damned!*

"Shut up, you stupid bum!" A child's voice: high and strident.

*My thoughts! They can read my thoughts!*

"Shut up!" another one screams. He tries to look towards the source of the second voice, but all he sees is a blur of sexless, identical faces.

*Gary? Are you there? Please help me, Gary!*

A third voice joins the throng—like the others, deceptively childish—(he knows better, for THEY are very old)—and then another and another until finally he is confronted by an endless procession of shrieking mouths—all of them merging into a single chorus, into that furious howl, into that all-consuming scream—*shut up you stupid bum shut up shut up you stupid—*

He turns and flees but the swarm follows him. Their spindly arms rise and fall in unison, pelting him with gobstoppers and gummi bears and sour soothers and all the tiny treasures of childhood. He pleads and screams but the candies continue to arc and fall, burning his flesh like acid raindrops. Phantom feet—*his feet?*—stumble over alien patches of plantlife snaking between sidewalk cracks, moving too slow, so impossibly slow—like wading through tar—but still THEY run, faster, faster, gaining on him now, highstepping knees and flailing elbows all of them shrieking and laughing and howling—

### **FOLLOW THE BEAM**

He looks ahead and sees his salvation once more—beckoning to him, leading him, infusing him with the holy essence, carrying him forward and forward and forward and forward until—

*falling dear jesus I'm—*

He lurches forward, hits glass hard. For an awful second he has no idea where he is. A small space, too small to move: some sort of transparent coffin. The children's mouths stretch and distend against the glass walls, gaping like mutant starfish—red lips and pinky-gray tongues and little white teeth like suckers. They will devour him. He will die in this place.

### **CONCENTRATE**

He looks around, spots a black plastic box. Not a coffin at all, he realizes, but a phonebooth. A glass sanctuary. But he is not quite safe, not yet; he can sense the primordial scream thrumming through the walls, struggling to envelop him:

*shut up you stupid bum shut up shut up you stupid bum*

### **YOU MUST WARN THE SON**

He picks up the phone. Slowly, so slowly, his hands shaking and jittering, he brings the receiver towards his face. It darts out of his grasp,



swings against the wall with a sickening crunch. The children that are not really children giggle and scream. A moan escapes his lips as he crouches to pick up the receiver, but then he has it, he has the phone, he's saved, and the words pour out of him like pure spring rain: *Gary, I love you, my dear little boy, Gary, don't go, you have to listen to me.*

A cold, robotic monotone answers back:

(please completely insert your card and dial the number you wish to reach)

No! It's not fair! But he can't give up now; he is the One and Only Prophet. He paws desperately through his pockets, and discovers dozens of quarters, pounds of the things, *tons* of them. He sobs with gratitude, trembling so badly that he can't even stand—can't even reach the coin-slot—and suddenly he realizes that there's too many of them, growing and growing, expanding through his coat pockets, pushing his ribs so that he can barely breathe. He cups his hands and shovels the quarters away from his body—a pathetic attempt, like a stormbound man bailing a rowboat with a teacup. The coins slip through his fingers in a continuous stream, filling the bottom of his plexiglass prison, and he pulls himself to his feet but *oh jesus* the level keeps rising, and now he can't move his feet, packed tightly in metal up to his ankles his calves his thighs and soon it will reach his *head* the silver stream plugging his throat and his nose and his ears and his eyes (shining with the dull glint of dirty coins) and then he will become one of THEM—

The beam is there to save him, serenading him with a peculiar concerto—a series of atonal beeps. He is struck once more with a vision of Gary sitting in the airport lounge. Gary looks directly at him, mouthing half-articulated words, trying to tell him something. He can barely hear anything over the scraping metallic roar of the coinage, over the children's collective scream, but he slowly grasps the secret meaning of those moving lips. He begins jamming quarters into the phone one after another, as many as he can. He closes his eyes, and the beam sings him the melody once more—a strange off-key sequence, yet familiar, oddly musical. The essence of the GODHEAD inhabits him, guiding his fingers across the touchtone keys, and with each press he hears the phone return the melody.

He has never heard a more beautiful song in all of his life.

Detached calm descends over him, a stillness in the core of things. Even though he still senses, in some abstract way, the howling children and the rising river of coins, these things no longer bother him. Instead, he focuses all of his attention on the receiver in his hand, on this thin thread that connects him to salvation. Finally, a man answers:

"Hello?"

A stranger's voice, not quite how he remembered it. And yet, he knows: this is Gary, his baby, his dear little boy. He is too scared, too elated, to speak.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

He forces himself to speak. His throat feels like a rusty hinge.

Gary?

"Yes. Speaking." No hint of recognition yet. Caution hidden beneath formality.

He pauses, thinking of all of the questions, all the declarations, everything he has dreamed of saying—*i love you Gary/where did you go?/have you been a good boy?*—but he senses that there is very little time, for both of them, for everyone.

*You can't get on the plane! It's bad, Gary! You can't get on the plane!*

A long pause. Finally, the man speaks, so quietly, the voice of a lost child: "Who is this?"

*It's Daddy! Don't you recognize me? I love you so mu—*

Click. The sound reverberates like a gunshot. The line expires.

He howls because his poor darling boy is gone, taken from him forever, and THEY did this, he knows it. The children laugh and scream and slam their tiny fists against the walls of his prison, and yes, he's trapped, no way out, but he has a plan oh yes a plan he slams his body against the glass, delivering himself unto the leering mouths and pumping fists, again and again, savouring every hard smack because it's the only way out and now everything's rocking back and forth and back and forth and he's falling down into a deep dark hole laced with broken glass (pain all is pain) but he thinks of it as atonement—as bliss.

As the nightmare of his waking life begins to fade, the beam delights him with the music of his own body—one last glimpse of his own symphonic glory. He tastes the grandeur of his blood, the splendor of his breath, the majestic drumming of his heart for the last time.

The final movement, a bittersweet ostinato: the distant wail of a police siren.

#

*The man with the clipboard proofreads his own words. He is in a hurry, and he mainly checks for typos:*

After careful deliberation, we believe that Mr. Kristofferson is medically incompetent, and that major treatment decisions should therefore be diverted to an appropriate proxy. Since we have not been able to locate any next-of-kin, we recommend that power of attorney fall to the attending physician and/or a suitable proxy

appointed by him. Although Kristofferson displays an adequate knowledge of the typical symptoms of his illness, he does not appear to understand the particular depth and severity of his own condition, as witnessed by his latest relapse. Thus, in accordance with the earlier findings of Dr. Lee's report, we recommend that Kristofferson immediately resume the previously prescribed dosage and follow an appropriate aftercare plan.

*Later, the man with the clipboard will run the statement past the rest of the review board. They probably won't change anything; after all, they're usually in a hurry too.*

*Good, he thinks. At least that's over.*

His mind is absent. Strange people with pinched, vacant faces come and go. They pace aimlessly in circles, stare blankly at the television monitors hanging from the ceiling, wait for arcane signs from flickering screens. When two of these lifeless wraiths encounter, they may cling desperately, or laugh loudly at nothing—or they may simply part along different paths, continuing their separate vigils. Distorted voices mutter garbled incantations over hidden speakers. Only he can understand them; only he can decode the secret language they speak.

After all, Gary is a Frequent Flyer. He's used to airport terminals.

He checks his watch. He stares at the numbers for a moment without really comprehending their significance. He gazes blankly at a distant corner of the room once more. His mind is still mired in his memory of this morning, endlessly fielding the same phone call. He's been pranked before by bored kids looking for kicks; he's even received threatening phone calls a few years back from a former co-worker, a terminal drunk who accused Gary of having an affair with his wife. That had definitely been worrisome, but this had felt different; this call had seemed downright *scary*. He can't get the sound of the guy's voice out of his head; he keeps hearing it, high-pitched, panicky and wet, as if the guy were choking on phlegm. Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if the guy had started rambling nonsense; if that were all, Gary thinks, then he might have been some random freak. But the voice on the other end knew Gary's *name*, and he spoke it with such intimacy.

Maybe the guy looked Gary's name and number up in the book...but then, how did he know that Gary was flying today?

Gary shudders. He can't shake the feeling that he's being watched. Right now. Hungry, invisible eyes.

He casts a nervous glance around the airport terminal. All he sees is the same elderly tourists, the same harried mothers herding their kids,

the same white-collar types in rumpled suits—in other words, the same old wraiths. No serial killers in hockey masks; no knife-wielding maniacs.

*Snap out of it*, he mutters under his breath. He self-consciously reminds himself to stare straight ahead, to stop swiveling his head around like a kid looking for shadow-monsters. *The call was a coincidence. It meant nothing.*

Somehow he knows that this isn't quite true, but he is saved from his own thoughts by the boarding call. As he lines up with his fellow passengers, he gazes dreamily at the plane on the tarmac. A pretty impressive looking piece of machinery, he must admit, all that steel gleaming in the sun. He's never really been afraid of flying before, but he's in a strange mood now. He can't stop staring at the thing. Impressive, that plane, but foreboding. Through some trick of the light the polished steel reflects a harsh, brilliant radiance, so white that it's almost a noncolor. He feels a wave of distrust passing through his gut as he stares at the plane. It looks like a bullet. A winged bullet.

*Maybe I should go home. Take a sick day. Maybe—*

But then he's at the front of the line, and his fear dissolves in the gleaming white of the attendant's smile. He's being silly; he can't allow himself to be spooked by every nutball who has access to a telephone.

The attendant takes his ticket, smile still screwed firmly in place. "Have a nice flight"—her gaze drops to the ticket, returns once more to his face—"Mr. Thomas."

He hates being called Mr. Thomas. It makes him feel ancient. He's only thirty, for God's sake. He conceals his irritation behind a smile nearly as fake as the attendant's own.

"Call me Gary," he says, trying to sound cheerful. The words, the phonemes feel phony inside his mouth—but that's how normal people talk, right? Just another average day in the rat-race. Everything's great. He's going to be fine.

The flight attendant waves at the tunnel behind her with a grand flourish, a *what's-behind-door-number-two* gesture. "Right this way, Mr. Thomas."

He steps into the tunnel. One foot in front of the other: one, two, one, two, one, two. He can feel himself growing more tense with every step.

Finally he reaches the door of the plane. At first, it looks like a dark hole. Pale, artificial light beckons from inside. He doesn't want to go in there. He knows something awful will happen to him if he goes inside.

He steps past the threshold.

And, of course, nothing happens. He lets loose an involuntary sigh. *What did you expect: did you think the thing was just going to burst into a*

*fireball?* He would laugh, just to show that he's cool with things, but he realizes that this would look strange—after all, talking to yourself is generally a sanity *faux-pas*. Instead, he takes his seat, snaps on his seat-belt, flips half-heartedly through the travel magazines.

His mind keeps wandering back to the call. He keeps hearing that high, panicky voice choking, *It's Daddy! Don't you recognize me?* Gary has never met his father before. His dad died when Gary was very young, and his mother didn't keep many pictures. She said it hurt too much to remember.

*It's Daddy! Don't you recognize me?*

Just a coincidence. Some airline peanuts, a few scotch-and-sodas, and he'll feel better in no time.

He sinks back in his seat. Closes his eyes.

Tries to ignore the flight attendants as they perform their familiar refrain:

"In case of emergency..."

*He sits and stares out his window at a cloudless sky. Just a few days in here, the doctor said. A few days to help him rest and get better. The pills will help, the doctor said.*

*He tries to remember the music, but it's gone. No magic left inside of him now; he is a creature of bone and skin and sinews once more. This is for the best, the doctor said.*

*All he can hear is a small, sad requiem, a residual humming already beginning to depart his mind. He'll never see the beam again. He'll never be able to save his son.*

*So he sits. And stares. And waits for the ruby bloom to claim the sky. •*



*That's what every doctor and nurse at the hospital said. I realized they weren't speaking with surprise or wonder, or even good humor. They were scolding me: "You really should be dead."*

# Stick House

Catherine MacLeod

## TAPE ONE.

A dead cop just passed me driving south. I don't see him turning; I think he's gone. I'd like to believe that means he doesn't want me, but, if so, he's one of the few dead who don't.

Or maybe we're just not the only ones they're hunting today.

God, I hope I make it to the beach.

Ron, this is hard for me. You know when I'm scared I clam up. It used to drive you crazy that I wouldn't talk to you. Well, believe it or not, dear one, your Caylee's gonna talk now. I wish I had my cell phone—we could arrange to meet somewhere, or at least talk if we couldn't—but nooooo, I refused to carry it on my day off. Always have microtapes, though. You never know when you'll meet a good interview.

I don't know how long I have. I have visions of them running me off the road. I'm tempted to say that after this I'll never complain about rush hour again, but I'm afraid it's true. Even if they don't kill me on the highway, I have less than an hour to say everything I should have said in

the last three years.

No, I guess I can't say it all. So...what's the most important thing? *I love you?* No, too easy. Besides, it would be cheating to say that now.

Let's start with *thank you*. Not only for remembering my birthday, or helping with the dishes without being asked. No, let's start with the big one.

Thank you for knowing me well enough to write your initials by the payphone in the hospital lobby. I stumbled out of the elevator and headed for the phone out of sheer habit: I'm used to calling you the second something goes wrong, either to ask for help, or tell you not to worry. Then I remembered there was no point. You must have done the same thing.

I almost ran past the phone, but those letters turned me on my heel. They were written in blood, just beginning to dry. I went out the door knowing you'd been alive ten minutes earlier, you were heading for the car, and you were in deep trouble—for the first time ever, you ran without coming to get me first.

What did they do to you, Ron? I swear to God if they're not already dead I'll kill them.

I went to the taxi stand in the parking lot. A cabbie glanced up as he trashed the lid of his coffee-to-go, then ignored me as he added cream and sugar. The first cab was running, the driver leaning against it with his back to me. I said, "Hey," and his head creaked around slowly. He said my name, "Cay-lee," like a crow with a mouthful of something wet. My second cadaver in less than five minutes. Didn't quite have the thrill I felt with the first one, you know? He shambled around the car after me, and I danced away like we were taught in self-defense class—*Keep the car between you and your attacker*.

The dead aren't nimble, thank God.

I stole the cab. I crawled through the passenger side, and while he was scrabbling at the door I rolled out of line. Oh yeah, while I think of it, thank you for teaching me to drive a stick shift. I heard a yell as I drove off, then a liquid thump as Coffee Guy threw his cup. He hadn't seen the corpse waiting by his car, just a crazy lady running circles around it. When I looked back the corpse was just standing there, as if he didn't need to chase me.

He didn't.

I made it uptown without crashing anything, but I don't know how. The dead are everywhere. I saw them at bus stops, looking in store windows, sitting in their cars. One of them pulled out after me. No one noticed.

Ghost car? I bet. I can't picture the dead committing grand theft auto.

I wonder if they have trouble finding parking space.

Habits are useful things. Going back to wait in the car if we lost each other was a good one. I hate wandering the mall like a lost soul. I didn't know where you might be, but the car was a place to start. It was halfway across the city, but I hoped you might be there.

Well, you weren't, and the car wasn't where we left it.

You nut, you actually went into the underground parking garage and brought the car out for me. Weren't you afraid of meeting more dead in there?

Yeah, of course you were, but you did it anyway.

Thank you.

I wanted to just keep driving, but I figured you brought the car out for a reason, so I went to look. Now, my guess is you're heading for McLaren's Beach in a hot-wired car, since you left me this one. Even fed the meter so it wouldn't get towed. Still looking out for me. Don't ever think I took you for granted, Ron. I didn't. I don't.

I noticed two things at once: a drying stick house on the dashboard—how much blood have you lost, dear?—and the dead guy pulling up behind me. No one else saw this thing of... sheared bone... tattered flesh. I drove out into the street as his hand hit the trunk. It left a thick smear.

So now I'm on the highway. I keep glancing at the blood on the dashboard. How many times have we drawn that stick house in the last three years, that cartoon that means *Meet me at the beach house*? We've drawn it on cards, on post-it notes; once you even e-mailed it.

We said it was the only place we felt safe. Outside the city, remote enough to be quiet, so ugly you said it looked like a child's stick drawing. We spent some great weekends there. Every time we arrived you announced, "Stick House, end of the line, everybody out."

Well, it was funny at the time.

I remember that, though I'm not sure how reliable the rest of my memory is. Every so often my mind seems to go blank for a second. Shock? Probably. I do remember you didn't want to go in one more bookstore—"Cay, whatever you're looking for, it'll still be here tomorrow, okay?"—but I did, so we went. My God, was that really only this morning?

Ron, I'm sorry. It doesn't seem like enough—it *isn't*—but I don't know what else to say. I'm sorry.

If I hadn't insisted on going to that last store, we wouldn't have come so close to being road kill. I remember that car running the stop light

and coming straight at us. Well, no ... I really just glimpsed the car. I saw the sunlight glinting off it. I swear it came out of nowhere. Did you start to pull me back? I don't recall, but I'd bet on it, and the car passed so close the wind stream threw us against the side of the number nine bus. I heard the *smack* when you hit. I felt the *thud* when I rolled under the bus. We should both be skinned raw.

We should both be dead.

That's what every doctor and nurse at the hospital said. They all shook their heads over my chart and said, "You really should be dead." About the tenth time they said it, I realized they weren't speaking with surprise or wonder, or even good humor. They were scolding me: "You really *should* be dead." That scared me, Ron, but not as much as their refusal to tell me where you were. Not knowing if you were all right was the worst thing.

Seeing my first walking corpse came a close second.

## **Tape two.**

Talking corpses: you know there's an article there. Wonder what the lifestyles editor would think of the story proposal. The contradictions are mind-boggling.

The corpse at the hospital, now—that was an ugly wake-up call.

I was supposed to stay in bed—did they expect me to just wait for the dead to collect me?—but I had to find you. They wouldn't tell me if you were alive. I dressed, grabbed my fanny pack, and wobbled to the door. I thought the corpse was an hallucination.

He was halfway down the hall, and when I froze in the doorway he swivelled his head and looked at me. *Looked* at me. An impressive feat for someone with only bugs quivering in empty eye sockets.

His feet clicked on the tile as he started toward me, and I ran. Too stiff to run gracefully or well, I pounded into the elevator with my heartbeat deafening me. Behind me, I heard him gurgle, "Cay-lee."

Do medical personnel just know when you've reached your limit, or do they teach the arcane sciences in med school now? Do they have some way of knowing when you've used up all your chances? Apparently, if they don't, the dead do.

I think that's why this is happening, Ron. They were right—we're supposed to be dead. No one else saw the corpse at the hospital. I was the only one who even flinched.

I think you only see the dead if you're supposed to be one of them.

I'm surprised they're not making more of an effort to get me, like putting up a roadblock or something. But maybe that would endanger people

who aren't actually supposed to die today. Or maybe they know time's on their side. You have to figure the dead know how to be patient.

Eventually they'll get me, but I don't care, Ron. I really don't. I just want to get to the Stick House first.

*Did I ever say thank you?* If not, I should have, for a lot of things. For liking Mickey Spillane and jazz. For being a good friend. You're good company—and a generous lover. Did I ever tell you the sound of your voice makes my knees weak? I enjoyed sitting with you and talking; I liked sitting with you and *not* talking. My baby: the master of the comfortable silence. I'm going to miss that most. What's in store for us isn't likely to be either comfortable or silent.

Dusk was always my favorite time at the beach. I love that first delicate moment of stillness. And I loved sharing it with you. My heart has never stopped smiling.

Seeing myself through your eyes has been a rare experience. For three years I was smart and funny.

For three years I was pretty.

We never talked about love. Were we saving it for later? I don't think so. I don't believe we ever used the word, except that once you said you loved my spaghetti sauce. But we bought the Stick House six months after we met. I think we planned on being together a while.

When anyone asks how we met, I always say, "By accident." Short and sweet—and true.

How many parties have we been to, Ron? Hundreds? Some mornings it sure felt like it. But that first one, the one where we met—who threw it? I don't remember, only that we both found it boring and decided to go out for coffee. We told our host we didn't want to outstay our welcome.

There should never have been people living in that building. It should have been condemned—and was the morning after we fell through the stairs. I recall every slow-motion second of those flimsy stairs splintering under me. We should both have plunged through that rotten wood head-first.

My first clear memory of you, Ron, is your hand gripping my wrist. I was barely hanging on when you pulled yourself up and reached back for me. You said, "It's okay. I know you're scared, but I'm not leaving without you."

And you didn't.

Ron ... there's something I never told you about that night. While I was dangling from your hand, I looked down. Later, I thought it must have been an illusion, but, dear one, I don't think that now. I saw a bright tunnel open in the darkness below me, a corridor of light that closed as



soon as you spoke.

We never talked about the big stuff. I don't know what you believe. I asked you once, "Do you think there's life after death?" It was the wrong thing to ask you after a hard day. You said, "Cay, I'm not even sure there's life before it." I never asked again. I guess I figured we'd get to it eventually.

Well, this is eventually.

I believe all those stories about the tunnel opening at the moment of death. I believe that when we die we go into the light; I always have.

I just passed five cadavers standing on the side of the road. They all turned their heads to watch me.

So many chills have run up my back today I feel frozen. That would be convenient. If my heart was cold, none of this would bother me.

I'm trying to stay in the thick of the traffic. This way they can't run me off the road without me hitting someone else. I just got the finger. Yeah, buddy, I know I'm tailgating. Sorry—I promise I'll never do it again.

The sun just came out. First time all day. For some of these people it might be a good omen.

Ohhhhh. I just realized. When that car ran the red light this morning, it wasn't sunshine I saw glinting off the hood, because there *was* none.

I...think I saw the light again. Maybe the car really *did* come out of nowhere.

### **Tape three.**

The wind is freshening. I can smell the ocean—and that restaurant where we buy scallops on Sunday. Can you smell it? How far ahead of me are you? Minutes? I just want to see you so damned bad.

This last trip to the beach isn't about trying to outrun the dead. It can't happen, Ron. This is about the fire. Believe me, I remember that all too well.

We should have died.

Bonita Latham's house party. Boy, that was a wild one. To be fair, Bonnie doesn't throw any other kind, but that last one topped them all. Did you ever find out what burned the house down? Candle, incense, cigarette? Firecrackers? Could've been.

Hey, did I ever tell you how I got trapped in the upstairs bathroom? I told Bonnie the clam dip didn't agree with me, but truth is, I'd locked myself up there to avoid her husband, prematurely drunk and sporting more hands than Kali.

None of those hands were the ones that reached for me through the smoke.

You banged on the door and yelled my name. My mouth was already parched. I know it was worse for you: when I opened the door I couldn't see you right in front of me.

"Caylee, where are you?"

I rasped, "Here."

"Reach for me."

"Ron—"

"Cay, I know you're scared, but I'm not leaving without you."

As your hand closed over mine, a *shimmer* of something made me look back. The tunnel of light glowed behind me, opening like a vortex. Then you pulled me to my knees, and I crawled away from the light, to you. We half-fell down the stairs, rolled right out the door. The ambulance took us to the hospital, sirens blaring.

We just hated to outstay our welcome.

I'm wondering now... does the vortex opening alert the dead that you're using up your chances? Considering how many times I've seen it, it's no wonder they're so determined this time.

I don't have time to finish this tape, Ron. I'm only a couple of minutes from the Stick House. I'm not sure when the dead cop clued in, but I've got him in my rearview. A dead woman in a half-ton just did a U-turn behind him. And to think I used to love a parade.

I wonder what anyone will think if they find these tapes. Doesn't matter; not my problem anymore.

These past three years were good ones, Ron, and if I never said thank you, I'm sorry.

The sky's turning gold ahead of me. I wish I could be glad I get to see one more nightfall, but I don't know if that's the sunset, or the vortex opening.

I hope you're there, Ron. I hope somehow you made it. And if I run like hell, I hope I get close enough to take your hand. I can see the driveway now.

Stick House, end of the line, everybody out.

There's too much left to say, and no time to say it. But—maybe one thing, okay? Maybe there's time to say the most important thing.

I know you're scared, but I'm not leaving without you.

Just a few more seconds, dear one. Hang on if you can.

I'm on my way. •

## about our contributors

MICHAEL BROCKINGTON is a film and television editor from Vancouver, BC, working on everything from short dramas to indie features, television series, documentaries and performance videos. Michael has written and directed a handful of short films, and has published short fiction and articles in newspapers and magazines including *Space & Time* and *Prairie Fire*. Michael is a graduate of the film production program at Simon Fraser University, where he worked for a number of years as a research assistant in the field of computer vision.

TODD BRYANTON is a surly young miscreant with a penchant for writing about himself in the third-person. He grew up in the frozen wasteland known as Saskatchewan—you know, that other province next to Alberta—and is currently attending the University of Regina. He blames his relative lack of publishing credits on some sort of government conspiracy. It certainly has nothing to do with his obscure, self-indulgent prose.

CLIFF BURNS is a 40-year-old writer with over 100 published short stories to his credit. His best-known books include *Sex & Other Acts Of The Imagination*, *The Reality Machine* and, most recently, *Righteous Blood* (PS Publishing, Britain). His work has appeared in magazines and

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MEGAN CREWE lives in Toronto, though her mind frequently vacations in Britain. She scrapes together time to write between studying for psychology courses and working with children with autism. Further details are divulged at [www.mlcrowe.com](http://www.mlcrowe.com).

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KARL JOHANSON is the editor and science writer for *Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine*. He is a former co-editor of *Under the Ozone Hole*, which won four Aurora Awards. Karl's spent several years in the computer game industry, working on several educational, adventure and arcade style products.

SUSAN MACGREGOR has had a varied (some might say checkered) career as an editor, writer, actress and stand-up comic. As well as currently being an editor with *On Spec*, she is also wrapping up the writing



of her book *The Eclectic Path*, a non-fiction work that introduces her approach to New Age Spirituality.

CATHERINE MACLEOD, fan of Abbot and Costello, Kathe Koja, William Windom, and all things "Wingfield," has published short fiction in *TalesBones*, *Solaris*, *On Spec*, and several anthologies.

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STEVE MOHN lives and writes in Montreal.

JACK SKILLINGSTEAD has lived most of his life in the Seattle area and has been writing fiction since an early age. In 2001 Stephen King selected Jack's entry as one of five winners in his *On Writing* exercise. And now at a not-so-early age Jack's stories have begun to appear in various print venues, including this one and *Asimov's Science Fiction*. In July of 2004 his first published story, "Dead Worlds" will be reprinted in the St. Martin's Press anthology *The Year's Best Science Fiction, 21st Edition*, edited by Gardner Dozois.

MARTIN SPRINGETT has been an illustrator of fantasy book covers and children's

books since he was lucky enough to be asked to illustrate the covers for Guy Gavriel Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry* in 1984. He has won the Aurora Award for illustration, and the Ruth Schwartz award in the children's book field. He is also a musician, and has just recorded a CD of music inspired by Guy Gavriel Kay's works called *Bright Weaving*.

Fantasy is the connecting link between the adult and kids books Martin has illustrated, from John Brunners *The Traveller in Black* to *Jousting With Jesters*, his first authored and illustrated children's book. .

KAREN TRAVISS is a journalist from Wiltshire, England. Her short stories have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Realms of Fantasy* and *On Spec*, and the first novel of her SF trilogy *City of Pearl* was published by HarperCollins in February 2004.

PETER WATTS is the obscure-but-stylish author of the hard-sf "rifters" trilogy, the third and fourth volumes of which are coming out from Tor over the next year. (He profoundly apologizes to both his fans for the fact that they'll be getting one novel for the price of two. It wasn't his fault.) To keep himself humble, Watts a) acts as a consulting biologist, performing acts of analyses on waterfowl species he knows absolutely nothing about, and b) keeps cats. ♣

## in upcoming issues...

In upcoming issues of *On Spec*, you'll find new work by TOM SWEENEY, E.L. CHEN, HOLLY PHILLIPS, MELISSA HARDY, PETER HYNES, PATRICIA WARD, LEAH BOBET, ANGELO NILES, JEFFREY D. JOHNSON, VALERIE V. DEACON, and many more!

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